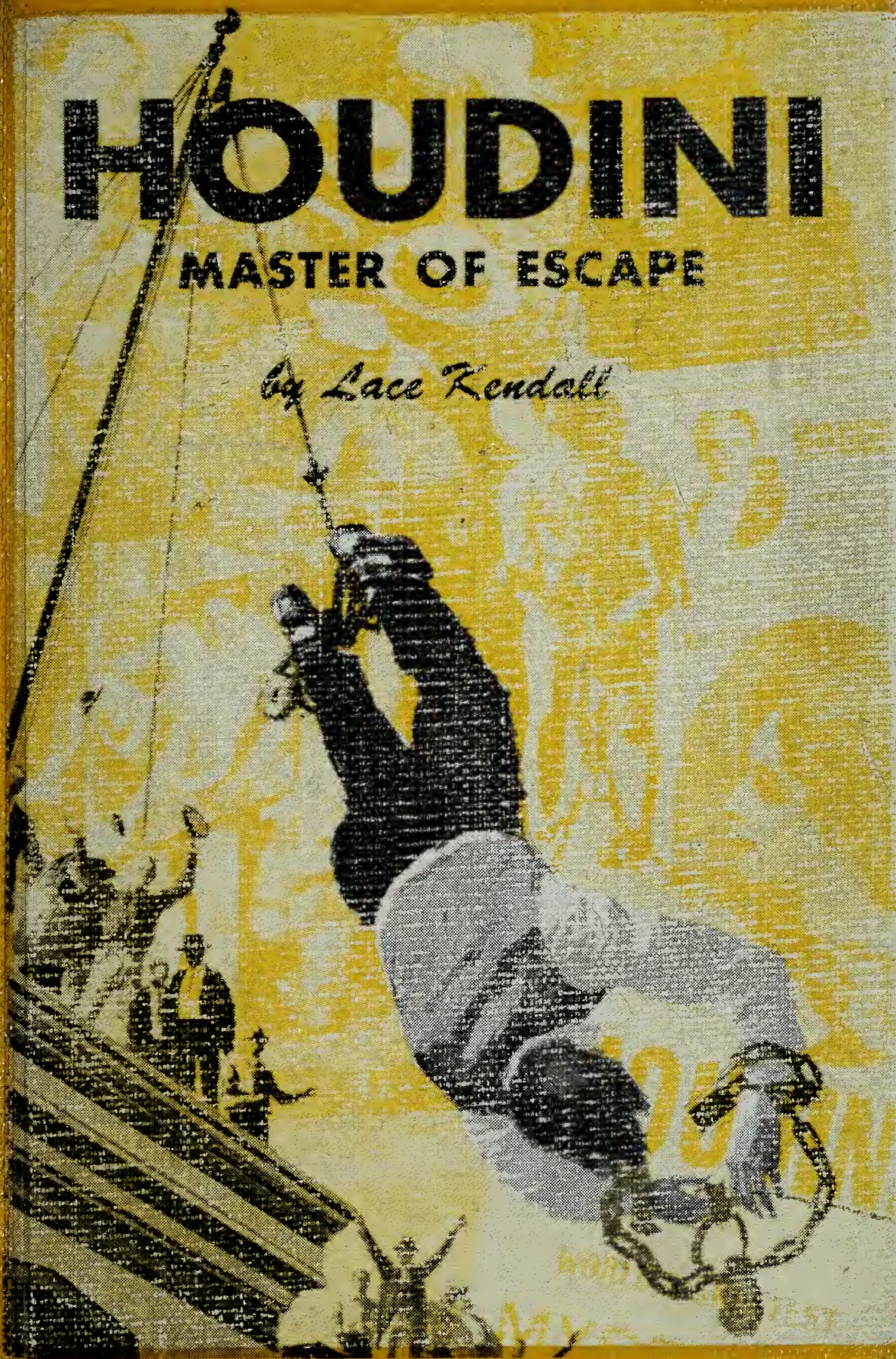
HOUDINI

MASTER OF ESCAPE

by Lace Kendall



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HOUDINI: Master of Escape

Lace Kendall

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MASTER OF ESCAPE

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HOUDINI: Master of Escape

ERIC THE GREAT

Ladies and gentlemen . . ."

The boy faced the rear of the woodshed, addressing an audience of stacked kindling and split pine logs. Sunlight streamed through the knotholes of the shed, bright against his black, curly hair, and he pretended that he was facing a glare of footlights while hundreds of persons sat watching in awe.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you can see there isn't anything up my sleeve."

Clumsily, he drew a torn red handkerchief from behind his elbow, waved it dramatically, and then tried to make it vanish into his coat collar. A tarnished mirror on the wall beside him showed that the handkerchief had not vanished. One crimson tip was poking up from under his collar.

Erich Weiss gave the mirror a look of despair, grateful that his audience was nothing but piles of stove wood. Wood couldn't snicker as a real audience would do if he didn't master his magic tricks better than that.

Perspiring in the heavy black frock coat he had begged from his oldest brother, he prepared to try again. Practice was the important thing, the magician

at the circus had told him. "You're pretty young, though," the man with the long white beard and peaked hat had said. "You'll have to grow up a little first."

That had been two whole summers ago, Erich thought. Now it was the fall of 1883 and he was nine and a half. Plenty old enough. Already he could open padlocks without a key and get out of rope-ties that the boys put on him. And he could make a dried pea change places under three walnut shells without touching the pea with his hands. That was more than the other boys in Appleton, Wisconsin could do.

He felt better as he took his stance again behind the old crate that was his magician's table. He lifted his arms, trying to remember how the conjurer had done it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I will now perform the——"

There was a loud snicker and it did not come from the wood pile. Erich wheeled and saw an eye at one of the knotholes, the shadowy outlines of crouching figures. His own eyes flashed, steel-bright and flecked with yellow. He ran out and saw three of his brother Nat's friends grinning at him.

The tallest, Hank Snyder, mocked, "Ladie-e-s and gentlemen-n-n, there ain't anything up my sleeve!"

"Oh yes there is," the second boy said. "His arm!"

All three shouted with laughter.

"Eric the Great!" Donny McCoy mocked.

Erich's face burned. The one thing he could not bear was to be laughed at. "You just wait!" he cried. "You'll see. When the circus comes again I'm going to get a job with it."

"Feeding the baboons?" Hank said.

"You'll see!" Erich said again. He felt as if he were

smothering in the late autumn heat. Suddenly he flung off the heavy black coat and ran toward the other side of the yard, where two trees stood. A heavy wire about six feet above the ground was stretched taut between them. "Watch this!" he called back over his shoulder.

As he climbed the makeshift ladder to the perch at one end of the wire, he remembered the day a week ago when he had first given a tightrope performance for his family—his four older brothers, his younger one, Theo, and his father and mother. But he had never performed on the wire for outsiders before. He had done all of his practicing down in the woods near the dump where he had first found the heavy wire. Now, as he got set on the tree perch, he glanced at the grinning faces below and felt his nerves tighten like the wire under his feet. He kicked off his shoes.

"If you break your neck it's not our fault," one of the boys called as Erich stepped out upon the wire.

Erich hesitated. He had forgotten the long stick he used as a balance pole. He took a step backward.

"Scared already?" Hank challenged.

"Of what?" Erich answered. He'd show them, even without a balance pole. Arms outstretched, he ran out on the wire. It quivered and swayed under him and for an instant he fought for balance. In control again, he paused in the center of the wire and stood on one foot, holding one leg outstretched before him. He did a brief, awkward dance on the wire, ran back and forth across it twice, and then in triumph started back toward the platform. Even as he ran he was aware that the boys had grown silent and were watching with grudging respect.

Erich reached the platform, triumph warm in his blood. "That isn't all I can do, either. I can hang by my heels and pick up needles with my eyelids. And I can do somersaults like an acrobat—" He broke off, aware that young Theo was racing toward them.

"Let's see you do a somersault, then!" Donny McCoy challenged.

Erich stepped out onto the wire. He wasn't really expert at the somersault but maybe he would be lucky.

"Look!" Theo came running toward the wire. "Look, Erich. I got a——"

Just as Erich poised to do the somersault, something green and damp and wriggling flashed from Theo's hand. It flicked against the wire. Erich started—swayed—grabbed wildly at the air. The wire swung out from under his feet. He turned in mid-air, catching at the wire with his hands, breaking his fall so that when he landed on the grass he struck with a small, jarring thud. Nothing was injured except his knickers. Ruefully, he looked at the fresh grass stains on his knees.

The boys laughed loudly again. "Some somersault! Anybody can fall off a wire. Let us know when Barnum writes to you from New York and hires you, Eric the Great!" They strolled off through the hot fall afternoon, tossing grinning looks back at him.

Theo was busy scrambling around under the wire, his small hands pouncing at something in the deep grass. With a squeal of triumph he stood up. "See, Erich. I got a frog for you to pull out of your magic hat!"

Erich drew his hand across his sweating forehead, gazing bitterly at the disappearing boys. "You could have waited a minute to show it to me, Dash," he told

his brother. His voice was not so much angry as grieved. He could never really be angry with Theo. Theo was the most faithful audience in the world, applauding everything Erich did, even when Erich made a mistake or fell off the high wire as he had done now.

Crestfallen, Theo stared down at the squirming frog. When he looked up again, Erich was smiling.

"You couldn't help it," Erich said. "Anyhow, those kids saw a free show. Someday they'll have to pay—even to see me fall. When the circus gets here next month . . ." He looked off into the distance, gazing beyond the tree-shaded streets to the mills by the river and beyond the mills to the road stretching out of town to unknown worlds over the horizon—the worlds of fame and fortune, of glittering lights and great, cheering crowds. He drew his gaze away and touched the frog in Theo's hand, stroking the green back gently. "He's a nice one. Maybe we can make a pet out of him."

Theo had been watching Erich's dreamy face. "You're going to be famous, ain't you, Erich? Can I be famous with you?"

Erich nodded and went to pick up the heavy black coat he had flung on the grass. "If you help me practice, Dash."

Theo ran toward the woodshed, dashing forward on his short legs in the way that had earned him his nickname. "Let's practice making the frog disappear and then come out of your hat."

"Wait a minute." Erich beckoned to Theo and grinned. "I'll show you a better trick now. Ma's got *äpfelkuchen* in the cupboard."

Theo let his breath out in happy expectation, and

then looked doubtful. "She put a new big lock on the cupboard, Erich; one even you can't open."

"Come on," Erich said, and led the way to the house.

On the back stoop a bag of curdled milk dripped whey into a crock. When the bag was finished dripping it would contain a fine white cheese which their mother would use for making blintzes. Glancing at the crock, his mouth already watering for the blintzes, Erich thought of how his mother had brought the crock all the way from Hungary. That had happened not long before he was born. He took pride in the fact that he was the first of the Weiss boys to be born in America. Theo had been born here in Wisconsin too, of course. Soon there was going to be another baby, Ma said. It was time there was a girl in the family, Erich reflected, although it was fun to have five brothers.

He opened the back door cautiously, winking at Theo. The boys could see their father's black-garbed figure seated at a study table. Dr. Weiss was bent over a book, as he so often was, peering through his glasses at the text, one hand stroking his graying beard. Erich thought with a smile that a person could sneak all kinds of apple cake or cookies from under Pa's nose. Pa had his mind on books and study so much he paid little attention to what went on around him. Back in Hungary he had been recognized as a real scholar and the family had had money. Then something had happened, something Pa didn't like to talk about. There had been a duel, Nat said, whispering to Erich one night, and their father's opponent had been carried off the dueling field fatally wounded. After that, Ma had come to Appleton with the family, helped out by relatives, and after a while Pa had joined them. But Appleton was different—a small

town, not a great city like Budapest. There weren't many other Jewish families and it was hard for Pa to make a living as a rabbi or teaching small classes in Hebrew.

Erich looked determined as he and Theo tiptoed into the big, sweet-smelling kitchen. Some day his family would have everything and never have to worry about money again. He would see to it.

"See?" Theo pointed at the large, new padlock on the pantry doors.

Erich reached into his pocket and took out a small piece of metal notched at one end. He went to the door and studied the new lock a moment. Then he worked at it with the pick and turned, grinning, with the lock open in his hand.

"Ach! Nein, Erich!"

Mrs. Weiss stood in the kitchen doorway, her hands on her hips. Her long skirt swished as she strode over to Erich and said in German, "Do I have to get a safe to hide sweets in, yet? If you could invent a magic that would put the sweets in there—" She pinched his ear, pulling him away from the cupboard, but in spite of her dismay there was a flashing brightness in her eyes that was half astonishment and half amusement.

"Erich can open anything, Ma," Theo said proudly.

Mrs. Weiss sighed and let Erich go. "Don't I know it already? Even his eyes stayed open for hours on a time when he was a baby and should have been sleeping." She shook her head in mock sadness, then reached up on the cupboard shelf. "All right. Here's one piece of cake you can divide between you. But, Erich, don't ever let me catch you again."

"I won't, Ma," he said with a laugh, catching her hand

and squeezing it. "Next time I'll vanish into thin air." He took the cake and started outdoors.

"Have you forgotten your manners?" she called after him. "Or do you have to run around the house first before you say your thanks?"

"Danke, danke!" Erich said, blushing at her reminder of the time when he was seven and had met his schoolteacher on the street. The teacher had said, "Good morning, Erich," but he had been so shy and tongue-tied that he had not been able to answer. She had told him, then, that when a gentleman met a lady he should take off his hat and bow. Red-faced, Erich had run past her down the street and all the way around the block so that he could meet her again. When he met her the second time, he took off his cap and bowed. It was a long-standing family joke, but he didn't mind the family laughter. The laughter of strangers was a different thing.

"I've had enough magic today," he said to Theo when they got outside. "Let's go swimming, Dash."

Theo started toward the can by the house where he had deposited the frog. "Shall we take the frog too?"

"Let's put him back," Erich said. "He'd be pretty slippery to handle in a disappearing act. He'd probably disappear for good."

Theo put the frog in his pocket and he and Erich went running down the street. Halfway toward the river they saw a big poster plastered on the side of a livery barn. In shining colors the poster showed a tiger leaping through a hoop that was held by a beautiful girl in a short, frilly skirt. Above the picture were the words JACK HOEFFLER'S FIVE-CENT CIRCUS.

Erich stopped, his heart pounding. "The circus is

coming already!" he cried. "Next week!" He hesitated, thinking of the cool, rapid river and the joys of swinging out over it on the rope he and some of his friends had rigged on a big maple tree. He thought of the dump across the high trestle bridge where he had found a treasure of old metal and even some discarded locks one day—a treasure he had carried on his back, stumbling across the forbidden trestle at twilight, only to run into his father near the end of the bridge. His father had shaken his head and said in his gentle, chiding way, "*Nein,* my son, you should not walk on the bridge. It is too dangerous."

The vision of the river and the dump and the trestle faded now as he imagined the sights and sounds of the circus. The scent of woods and grass could never compare with the sweet smell of sawdust and canvas. The chuckling sound of river water was nothing compared with the coughing noise of lions and the trumpeting of elephants. As for bright colors— he felt dizzy just thinking about all the flash and brilliance and dazzle of a circus performance.

"I can't go swimming now, Dash," he said. "I've got to get home and practice my stunts every minute."

Theo struggled to hide his disappointment. "It's awful hot," he said, trying to tempt Erich; but seeing that it was no use, and knowing that he could not go swimming alone, he turned and tagged after his brother slowly. Before they reached home he set the frog down into the deep, cool grass and watched the creature bound away.

The circus parade came down the main street one week later. It wasn't a big circus, only a few wild

animals and a small troupe of performers, but to Appleton it meant all the mystery and excitement of faraway places. Splendid and noisy, the parade came down the street with flags flying, clowns blowing horns and drums pounding. Women in frilly, glittering skirts, with diamondlike jewels in their hair rode on shining horses and blew kisses to the crowds. A giant elephant with sequin-studded trappings on its gray forehead tramped along the street, its legs as thick as the trunks of cottonwood trees. On the elephant's back was a swaying howdah, a roofed seat, and there was a driver in it dressed in a velvet robe and a dusty blue turban. Farther along came the wagons bearing the animal cages.

There were cries of, "Look, look!" as the lion cage went by. How fierce the beast seemed, with his golden eyes blazing and his tail lashing . . . the King of the Jungle, with a mane thicker and yellower than a shock of wheat. And there—a leopard, wet teeth glinting in a yawn. Monkeys chattering and scrambling for nuts thrown to them by the crowd. Two zebras went loping by, their stripes looking like convicts' uniforms. A clown came, carrying a pig and a parasol. Another clown blew a balloon—bigger and bigger. Girls put their hands over their ears and screamed. More horses, chalk-white, with rolling eyes. A strong man wearing a leopard-skin robe and carrying a heavy iron dumbbell. Chariots, men in spangled capes, performers in tights and satin jackets. Behind it all came the calliope, its music shrilling through metal pipes while the steam engine which gave it power left a scrawl of smoke on the air.

Noise, glitter, confusion, beauty. The crowd gasped, and cried out, and wished it would go on forever.

Crowds of boys and girls ran alongside the paraders, some staring in silent awe, others shrieking with excite-

ment. Theo and Nat Weiss trotted beside the elephant, so near that it seemed they could hear the creaking of its giant limbs. Attendants ordered, "Stand back! Out of the way!" Behind them came a group of older boys, including Hank Snyder and Donny McCoy.

"There's going to be a matinee!" voices cried.

"They're goin' to start it right after the parade!"

"You got any money?"

"Where's Erich?"

"Maybe we can sneak in under the tent."

"Come on! Hurry! Let's get good seats!"

An hour later, most of the boys and girls of Appleton had crowded into the main circus tent with its single ring in the middle. Most had managed to get a nickel for a ticket. Some had begged their way in, or crawled under the tent's sidewall when the circus attendants were looking the other way.

Now they sat openmouthed as the trained sea lions did their acts, barking and grunting, gulping down the fish tossed to them by their trainer. They watched the lion tamer stride into the lion's cage and heard the animal's savage roar as the whip flicked about its ears. A bareback rider went galloping around the ring, balancing on the broad back of a dappled horse, then leaping from one horse to another. Clowns turned cartwheels and touched off firecrackers. There was too much to watch, too much to see. The band blared. Drums rolled.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," the ringmaster shouted through his megaphone, "we will have the spectacular, amazing, unequaled tightrope acts."

It was Hank Snyder who saw Erich first. He gulped, looked again, and gasped, "Lookit! It's him!"

Erich Weiss, wearing a pair of green tights, was

crawling up one of the ladders to the tightrope. The tights had been intended for someone considerably larger than a small, nine-year-old boy. They bagged at the knees and wrinkled around the slender thighs. The tunic hung loosely over the narrow shoulders. But it did not matter. The radiance of Erich Weiss's face was like a pink star, shining in triumph.

"The youngest artist of the troupe—only nine years old—" the ringmaster was calling out above the murmurs and gasps and cries. "Eric the Great. From your own home town!"

Hank and his friends stared at each other, their mouths hanging open.

Theo stood up, waving a Crackerjack box. "Erich! I see you, Erich. See, here I am!" He turned, the pride on his face seeming to reflect that of Erich's as the drums rolled and Erich walked out onto the tightrope. "Look," Theo cried to everyone around him. "That's my brother up there! He's my brother!"

Nimbly, Erich went through his performance. As he bowed and then went from the tent he felt his heart would burst with joy as he heard the applause. He was a real professional!

THE PROMISE

"But Pa," Erich said, sitting across from his father in the study, "I've just got to go with the circus. They said if I did a good job this week they'd take me with them. They're getting ready to go, Pa! If I don't get my clothes packed——"

Dr. Weiss shook his head. "No, Erich. The circus is no life for a boy." On the desk beside him lay a *tallis*, a praying shawl, and he fingered it as he looked sadly at Erich. "No."

He said the final "no" softly but Erich knew that it was useless to plead any more. Most of the time his father spoke German but he could say "no" in English firmly and clearly enough. He could say it in French or Latin or Hebrew too. Whatever language he said it in, it all added up to the end of Erich's dreams.

Erich started to get up, then cleared his throat and asked huskily, "Can I—can't I at least go and tell them good-by?"

"Of course, my son. That would be only good manners." He laid his hand on Erich's shoulder. "You'll get over it. This is not the end of the future."

Erich's face worked. He ran for the door before his

father could see the tears spilling over his cheeks. It was easy enough for Pa to talk. Pa didn't know what it was like to have everything you wanted right in your grasp and then have it taken away. He wiped his eyes and ran toward the circus lot, not even hearing Theo call out to him. As he ran he remembered the sadness that was so often in Pa's eyes and voice and realized that maybe his father did know what it was to lose something he wanted. In the old country Pa had had everything. Here he was out of place. People laughed at his broken English and his old-fashioned ways.

Still, it wasn't the same, Erich told himself. Nothing could be as bad as having to say good-by to the circus, losing the chance he had worked for patiently for two years.

When he reached the lot he saw the roustabouts already pulling up the stakes of the side show tents. The main tent, its banners still blowing in the wind from the river, would be the last to go down. The two elephants, Jumbo and Monarch, were helping to pull the stakes from the earth. Erich's vision blurred again as he watched the big beasts lumbering about their work, looking like huge, gray old men in baggy pants. Beside them, Jock, the elephant handler, shouted his commands and struck at the swaying trunks with a stick no larger than a fly swatter. Jock waved at Erich, grinning, showing the missing tooth in the center of his grin.

"Got your grip packed?" Jock called.

Erich tried to answer and could not. He shook his head and ran on to one of the wagons that was labeled OTTO THE GREAT. Otto himself was at work loading the wagon. Except for his beard and his hoop earrings he

looked like an ordinary workman. It was the first time Erich had seen the magician without his long robe and tall, cone-shaped hat with the tiny half-moon glittering on it. It didn't matter. Otto's keen, dark eyes were the same, his long fingers nimble and masterful no matter what he wore. Sitting in a canvas chair near Otto was Bernard the Armless Wonder. Bernard was lighting his pipe, holding the pipe in his mouth with one foot while he held a match to it with the other.

"Ah, Eric the Great," Otto hailed as Erich made his way across crates and coiled ropes and wagon tongues. "Where's your suitcase?"

"I—can't go," Erich said. "I came to say good-by. And I never got to finish——"

From a nearby cage a lion roared. Erich started, a chill of fear and pleasure running across his shoulder blades.

Bernard reached up with his right foot and scratched the side of his head, laughing. "Leo's just a big cat, Erich. He won't hurt you—not as long as he's behind bars, anyhow."

"You didn't finish what you were saying," Otto reminded Erich. Some of the glittering powder he used during a performance still clung to his eyebrows and beard.

Erich looked up at him, dazzled by the false stars shining in the man's hair and eyebrows. "I never got to finish learning that dissolving knot trick you were showing me."

Otto looked thoughtful. "Well now—first we need a handkerchief."

Erich fumbled in his pockets.

Otto reached upward, one long hand flashing toward

the sky. A bandanna handkerchief appeared suddenly at the tips of his fingers.

Erich gasped.

Otto laughed. "That's a simple one. Bernard can do it with his toes."

Erich looked toward the armless man. If a person could train his toes to act like fingers . . .

"Watch now," Otto ordered.

"Yes, sir," Erich said humbly. He forgot everything else as he watched Otto's hands working at the handkerchief—the brown fingers tying a knot in the very center, pulling the ends of the cloth so that the knot coiled tightly for all to see. Then, with a tug, the knot vanished and the handkerchief was just as it had been before.

"Here," Otto said. "Try it."

Erich went through the trick successfully, but when he looked at Otto, Otto shook his head.

"You did it, true, but not smoothly or swiftly enough. You must learn to keep the watcher's attention on one thing while you're doing another. But you'll learn." He patted Erich's head. "You'll learn fast."

"Otto!" A dark-haired woman with a gypsy scarf still on her head leaned from the wagon and cried, "Get in here and help me with my trunk! Don't you get enough magic while you're working?"

Otto vanished inside the wagon so quickly that Erich thought it was another disappearing trick—except that he saw Otto's wife gripping the magician's sleeve firmly.

"Good-by, Otto!" Erich yelled. "*Danke*—thanks." His voice broke. He waited, watching the closed door.

A bearded, glittering head appeared at one of the windows, and then a long-fingered hand, waving.

"Good-by, Eric the Great. Good luck! See you next year."

Erich stared down at the trampled earth a moment, then walked slowly toward the other wagons and tents. The fat lady, Emma, sat fanning herself in her tent although the air was still cool. She put one great arm around Erich and patted his cheek. "This is a nice town," she said consolingly. "You'll be happy here."

Tambu the Giant, towering over Erich, reached down and took Erich's hand in his mighty fingers, shaking it gently. "Good boy," he said. "You very good boy."

Sadly, Erich went from place to place, saying farewell to all: the tattooed man, the "wild boy" from Borneo, the snake charmer, the midgets and the clowns, and the sweating canvas men who had taught him to tie clever rope knots.

The sun rose higher. Wagons began to move. Men on horseback cracked their whips and directed the moving wagons and the gilded chariots. Erich kept his eyes on the tallest spire of the tent. Slowly, slowly the tall pole swayed, the guy ropes drawing it closer and closer to the ground. The proud flag wavered and dipped and made a windy arc against the sky.

Erich closed his eyes before he turned blindly, running toward the river. He couldn't bear to watch the rest. He couldn't stand there waving while the wagons rolled slowly away. Away forever. For a year was forever.

He did not hear the school bell when it rang. He sat watching the river, the smell of sawdust and canvas and grease paint still in his nostrils. Then, at last, just as he realized how high the sun was and how late he would be for school, he heard the sound of wagon wheels.

He looked up, in spite of himself. Along the crest of

the slope above, the wagons were moving in a slow, steady line, silent except for the rumble of their wheels and the crack of the drivers' whips. The calliope, canvas-covered against the dust, seemed like a dead thing, a gray-brown ghost. Wooden panels covered the animal cages. Only the elephants were uncovered, big beasts plodding along patiently toward another show, a future glory.

Erich ran to the top of the slope as the last wagon rolled by.

"Good-by! Good-by Otto—Bernard—Emma—Jock—Jumbo—" The dust filled his throat and eyes. He turned back toward the town, his hands jammed into his pockets. And then he felt something in there. A small band of metal.

He pulled it out. It was a ring—a ring with a cat's eye jewel in the center. The last time he had seen it, it had been on Otto's little finger.

The morning sun blazed against his face. A gift. A promise. A little piece of the future! He turned it over and over in his palm, wonderingly.

When he walked on, the determination was back in his eyes. No, it was not the end. This was just the beginning. He would work harder than ever now. He would save every penny he made as a newspaper boy or as a bootblack so that he could buy the equipment to be a great magician. Greater even than Otto!

Later that day, at noon, Erich's father took him aside and said, "I am sorry I couldn't let you go with the circus, Erich. I know how you feel. I have to make a trip to Milwaukee soon. A great magician is performing there, the kind you have never seen before. Would you like to go with me and see his show?"

"Oh, Pa!" Erich seized his father's hand. "Could I? Oh could I, really?"

"*Ja,*" Erich's father said, smiling. The *Ja* wasn't good English but it was the most beautiful word Erich had ever heard.

The stage lights at the theatre in Milwaukee flooded the scene where the English magician, Dr. Lynn, stood holding a sword. In front of Dr. Lynn was a man standing inside a wide cabinet. As Erich watched from his seat in the balcony, Dr. Lynn seized the man's hair, placed his sword against the man's neck and made a cutting motion. The man's head tumbled from his body to lie beside the severed leg that already lay on the floor at the feet of one of Dr. Lynn's assistants.

Erich froze, staring. He knew it was all a trick and yet it had looked so real that goose-pimples stood up on his arms. All around him people were leaning forward, mouths open, watching in disbelief. Even Pa, beside him, had taken off his glasses and was rubbing them with his handkerchief as if he could not believe his eyes.

Dr. Lynn placed the sword against the victim's arms. Slash. An attendant rushed forward to receive the amputated limb. Another attendant took the severed head to a table and laid it there. Before Erich could catch his breath the head began to smile and talk!

Dr. Lynn was speaking to the audience. Erich moistened his dry lips, straining to hear.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, I will restore our victim *in toto*—" He made some flourishes with his hand, spoke a magic phrase, whipped a cloth across the table holding the head, and suddenly there stood the

victim completely restored, head, arms, legs all back in place, none the worse for his grisly experience.

The audience broke into applause, cheering, while Dr. Lynn bowed and smiled. Erich clapped until his hands burned. He was still clapping after the curtain had drawn shut for the last time. The house lights went on; the audience began to move toward the exits.

"Come, come," Dr. Weiss said. "The show is over."

Erich followed his father as if in a trance. The applause still echoed in his ears and wherever he looked he kept seeing the magician's last act, which was called "Paligenesia." An illusion. Yet it had seemed completely real. And how marvelous Dr. Lynn's other tricks had been! How smoothly he had accomplished them! With such an air, talking all the while. Moving about gracefully in his dignified evening clothes like a king—a king in a starched white shirt and black bow tie.

He remembered Otto's spangled robe, with the stains of travel on it . . . the dirty slippers underneath—and realized the truth. Otto was merely a small circus performer who had mastered a craft. Dr. Lynn was a highly paid prince of magic who had mastered an art.

"Satisfied now, Erich?" his father asked.

"No," Erich said unthinkingly, his mind busy with thoughts of his new goal in life. The circus was not a high enough mark to aim at now. When he realized that his father was looking at him in bewilderment, he explained, "I mean I want to be more than a performer in a circus side show. I want to be in a great theatre like Dr. Lynn."

"I see," his father said, and sighed. "Whatever you are or become, Erich, I want you to be a success. I had hoped you might be a scholar but . . . I'm not so young

any more, not nearly as young as your mother. When I'm gone I depend on you——"

Erich's startled, worried glance interrupted him. "What do you mean, Pa? What do you mean 'when you're gone?'"

"Nothing. I was just thinking out loud."

He said no more, but Erich felt a shadow pass over the sparkling excitement he had felt before.

In the days that followed, the excitement of the occasion stayed with him. Over and over he told Theo about the great Dr. Lynn and the exciting city of Milwaukee. Together he and Theo practiced new tricks: acrobatics, escape acts in which Theo tied Erich in coils of rope, sleight of hand tricks with cards and coins and colored handkerchiefs. Although Theo mastered many of the tricks too, Erich was nimbler and quicker. Above all, Erich was becoming so clever at unfastening locks of all kinds that Mrs. Weiss scarcely even bothered to padlock the pantry doors any more. It was no use.

When Erich was not busy with his magic he swam in the Fox River with his friends in summer, skated in winter, and worked at odd jobs. He was proud when he had the chance to deliver the first issue of the new *Milwaukee Journal*, and of the time when, as a bootblack, he polished the shoes of the state's governor. And when the circus came to town again he hunted up his old friends in the troupe and learned still more new tricks. Otto had been replaced by another man who was billed as "The Escape Wizard of the World." Watching the man wriggle out of chains and ropes and heavy boxes, Erich's imagination flamed anew and he went back to practicing escape tricks of his own with

fresh zeal. Now there were scarcely any locks left around Appleton that he couldn't open quickly with a lock pick or a small wire. The only new and interesting locks were at the locksmith's shop.

Erich began loitering around the locksmith's shop so often, gazing at the locks with hungry, curious eyes, that the smith gave him a job. After a few weeks Erich could open any lock in the place.

One day as Erich sat repairing a lock, he heard the shop door open and looked up to see the town's sheriff entering. The sheriff was accompanied by a giant of a man, almost as big as the tall man in the circus, but much uglier, with a scarred and bearded face and heavy black hair scraggling over his forehead.

"Got a job for you," the sheriff called to the locksmith. He pushed his huge companion forward and then Erich saw the handcuffs gleaming on the man's hairy wrists. We want to discharge this fellow now, but some fool at the jail lost the key. I figured you could file 'em off."

The locksmith got up. "Sure. It'll take a while, though. Looks like pretty hard steel."

Erich sat watching silently, as the locksmith began to file at the handcuffs. Sweat dripped from the smith's forehead as he sawed back and forth, and he finally paused, wiping his forehead. "It's as hot as a poker today, Sheriff."

The sheriff nodded, and then glanced toward Erich, who was sitting quietly working in his own corner. "Why don't you let the boy here file away on those?" he asked the smith. "I'll take you out and buy you a cold drink."

The locksmith considered, wiped his sweating face again, and then held the file out to Erich. "Go ahead."

Erich leaped forward eagerly. He was busily filing away even before the door closed behind his employer and the sheriff.

Back and forth he sent the file. Although he was eleven years old now, his hands were still not very large and were nowhere near as strong as those of his employer. As he worked, the file rasping against the steel without making any great progress, he felt the prisoner's black eyes boring into him with impatience and anger.

"A fine town this is," the big man muttered. "First they lock a man up for nothing and then they turn him over to a butter-fingered kid to let him free. Bear down, can't you? You ain't even making a dent in that steel."

"I am bearing down," Erich panted, perspiration running down his face and onto his hands. "I never used a file for this kind of work before."

"Excuses don't help any." The man tensed his wrists within the handcuffs. "Once I'm free I'm going to wring somebody's neck!"

Erich shivered, staring at the meaty, hairy hands. At the same time he was studying the lock. He had never been near a pair of handcuffs before. Maybe the lock mechanism was entirely different from any he was used to. Still, if he dared to try . . .

"Quit stalling!" the man barked.

Erich started to move the file again. He stopped. "If you could wait a minute, sir—I mean, maybe I could try something else."

The prisoner glowered at him. "Like what? Dynamite?"

Erich stood back, fumbling at his pockets. Handkerchief. Fishline. A couple of marbles. A skeleton key. A piece of wire. He pulled the wire out and approached

the prisoner timidly. Even though he might be able to pick the lock with his bent wire the man might still be angry enough to wring his neck as he had threatened. Well, he had to risk it. Here was an opportunity to try a kind of lock he had never tried before.

He felt the man's breath against his cheek as he worked at the lock. His heart beat heavily. He leaned closer, prying, experimenting. There was a tiny click. One handcuff fell off. Triumph leaped through Erich's chest. He heard the man say something under his breath as Erich worked at the second handcuff. In a moment the second cuff fell free.

Erich ducked back, breathless, his eyes shining even as he poised for flight. The man stood rubbing his wrists, staring at him from under his heavy eyebrows, looking faintly bewildered.

The door swung open, making a stir of air in the hot room, and the sheriff and the locksmith stood there.

"Got the cuffs filed off, huh?" the sheriff said to Erich. He prodded the ex-prisoner. "All right, move along now, man."

"I didn't file them off," Erich said in a voice sharp with pride. He turned to the locksmith. "I picked 'em, with this wire."

The locksmith scratched his head. The sheriff blinked. The ex-prisoner, on his way out, looked back and grinned. "Better watch that kid, Sheriff. If you ever put him in your jail he'd just walk right out without half trying." To Erich he said, "You got brains. Use them and get out of this hick town. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Erich said stiffly, remembering his manners even as his head spun with the huge man's advice. *Get out of this town. Use your brains.*

He kept thinking about it as he walked homeward. Appleton was a pretty small place, all right, in spite of its three new electric trolleys. He hadn't realized just how small it was until he had seen Milwaukee. Visions of other cities he had not seen flared in his mind. New York. Chicago. London. Berlin. Budapest . . . Maybe Ma and Pa wouldn't even miss him now that there was a new young brother in the house and another baby on the way. In fact, there was scarcely room to put them all. And he'd heard his folks talk often, when they thought he wasn't listening, about how hard it was to feed so many mouths. Still, where would he go and what would he do? He remembered his brief job with Hoeffler's Circus. Some other circus would hire him, he was certain.

That night he talked to his mother about the idea of his leaving home. She only laughed and took him in her arms as if he were no bigger than his baby brother, smoothing his hair and saying, "My silly Erich. It's your head that's wandering, but your feet must not wander. *Nein.* Not yet."

Not yet. But soon. After another winter? Another year?

Erich was celebrating his twelfth birthday on an April afternoon in 1886 when his father called him into the study.

"Sit down, Erich," his father said somberly. "I want to talk to you."

Erich sat down, waiting.

"I am an old man, son," his father said. He stroked his short beard as if to call attention to the silver hairs mixed with the black. "Old and tired. We must face

the facts. Someday I will die." He waved his hand for silence against Erich's protest. "I want you to promise one thing. I ask this of you because—" he seemed to hunt for words—"because, although your brothers are fine boys there is something about you I know I can depend on. Promise me that you will always look after your mother and see to it that she is never in want. Do you understand, Erich?"

Erich kept his gaze on his father's face. "Yes, Pa. I promise." He got up suddenly, inspired. "If I could go out in the world now——"

"You're a child still. I didn't mean that. It's one thing for your older brothers to go——"

"I'm not a child. I'm strong. And I can do tricks now even better than Otto could do them. Even the locksmith can't teach me anything new—or couldn't before he had to close up his shop. I can't make any money here just doing odd jobs."

"There is more than money in life," his father said. "There is study and learning. You need to stay in school."

"I don't want to be a scholar," Erich protested. "Anyhow, I can read and write and do all the sums I need to."

"Now you think so. Later—well, you will see." Dr. Weiss grew silent, gazing through the window at the back yard and at the trees stirring lazily in the breeze. "We'll see, we'll see. In time."

Erich went outside and stood looking up at the blue sky, then at the road winding out of town across the Wisconsin hills.

"What're you doing, Erich?" Theo's voice asked at his elbow.

Erich gestured toward the woodshed. "Come on." When they reached the shed Erich said, "I want to tell you something but you're not to tell anybody else, not even Ma. I'm going, Dash. I'm going to go away. I'm a man now and I've got to start my career."

Theo stared at him. "How can I help you practice to be a great magician if you go away? I don't want you to go."

"I have to. I should have gone before." He moved over to the old crate and the shelves that were filled with all the magical apparatus he had managed to find or make or buy. Carefully he began stowing the articles in a cardboard box.

"Where are you going, Erich?" Theo asked hoarsely.

Erich looked at the sunlight flashing through the knotholes, thinking. Otto had once said he lived in Galveston, Texas. "Texas," Erich answered.

"Where's that?"

Erich busied himself with the cardboard box, avoiding Theo's solemn, marveling eyes. He wasn't sure himself just where Texas was except that it was a long way from Appleton. "West," he said. "It's out West."

"Oh," Theo said. "I hope it ain't too far for me to come when I get grown up, too."

DUSTY JOURNEY

The road stretching before him was pale blue in the pre-dawn starlight. At the last bend of the road Erich paused and looked back. He could see his house from here. It seemed asleep, dim and still behind the oak trees. He imagined he could see the gleam of the old wire strung between two trees although he knew it was too rusty now to glitter. His throat ached. Everything was so still he could hear his heart beating like a machine. He took a last look at the house and the town, coughed against the lump in his throat, hitched his pack higher on his shoulders, and went on. Briefly he wished that he had written a note to his mother to tell her not to worry. Well, Dash would explain. Then when he was rich and famous he would come home and fill his mother's lap with gold.

He walked faster, breathing deeply. Grazing cows mooed at him from the fields he passed. The sound of a cart rattled in the distance and he ducked into the shelter of pasture trees. If some farmer he knew saw him and urged him to turn back he was afraid he might give in. For already homesickness tugged at him.

He went on, the miles falling away. He found a creek

and shade-heavy trees and sat beneath them, eating the bread and cheese he had brought with him. In the distance a train's whistle sounded.

When he had eaten his breakfast and bathed his hot face in the creek, he trudged on. His feet were beginning to ache and his back felt sore beneath his pack. For the first time he began to realize just how far away Texas was. He had looked it up on the map at school. A thousand miles or more. He had walked only a short way and already his feet felt like hunks of iron.

The train whistled again, sounding closer this time. Erich looked across the rolling landscape and saw the train's smoke several miles away. It was a long, slow freight train. About a quarter of a mile ahead was a depot and a small cluster of buildings. Erich began to run, remembering hobos who rode the freight cars into Appleton. If he was lucky maybe he could get a free ride, too.

Twenty minutes later Erich sat in an empty freight car, staring out at the swiftly passing fields. He grinned, stretching his tired limbs, and took off his cap so that the wind coming in the open door could blow the dust from his black hair. The long blue waters of Lake Winnebago glittered before him—mile after mile of waves and sunlight. Then the lake was gone and the rich farmlands took over.

Another twenty minutes and his eyelids sagged. He curled up on the floor, his pack under his head, and slept.

When he awoke, the sun was past its zenith and the clacking sound of the train wheels was slower. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. The train stopped. He looked out,

seeing a depot ahead. Water was pouring into the locomotive from a water tank.

"What do you think you're doing?" a voice demanded.

The next instant, Erich found himself being lifted from the freight car. A burly figure in a trainman's cap flung Erich's pack after him. "We don't allow free riders on this train, sonny. You better start hiking back home where you belong."

Erich picked up his pack, took another look at the stern-faced brakeman, and started across a cornfield. The cornfield was a mistake, he discovered very soon. Rain had collected in the troughs between the young corn rows, and soon his boots were so clotted with mud that each step became heavier. Behind him the train whistled, clanked, and started on its way again. Erich headed toward a road on the other side of the field.

The drier surface of the highway was a relief after the soggy field. He rested briefly, ate the remains of the food he had brought, and went on; but when he had gone a mile he felt a growing soreness in his right heel. He began to limp. Hunger soon began to nag at him, too. He stopped at last, looking back the way he had come, wondering if it was possible to get home before night—night that would find him without shelter or food or a place to sleep. He took a step in that direction, then stopped. He had bragged to his father about how strong he was, how he could look after himself. And what about all the gold he was going to bring home?

He went on, his jaw set.

It was late afternoon when he saw a small town ahead and noticed a farmhouse close to the road with

a pump in the back yard. Thirsty, dusty and weary, he made his way to the farmhouse door and knocked.

A thin woman with hair pulled back straight into a bun opened the door.

"Excuse me, ma'm," Erich said, "but I'm awfully thirsty. I was wondering if I could have some water."

"Thirsty, eh? Aren't you hungry too?"

"Well, yes, I am. I'd be glad to do some work if you could spare a little food."

"What kind of work can you do?"

Erich said with dignity, "My real work is being a magician. But I can chop wood, too, and pull weeds or anything else like that. My name is Erich Weiss."

The woman looked at him closely. "Just where are you from?"

"Appleton." He moistened his dry lips. "Where am I now, ma'm?"

"Delevan, Wisconsin," she said. "That's a long ways from Appleton. Over a hundred miles. How'd you tear your pants?"

Surprised, he looked down at his knickers and saw that there was a big rent in them. It must have happened when he was tossed from the freight car.

"You'd better come in," the woman said. "I guess I can spare some food, all right." She smiled. "And the water's free. Might be a good idea to use some on your face and hands, too, before you set at the table."

He smiled back at her, feeling a rush of warmth and gratitude. "Oh, thank you Mrs.——"

"Flitcroft," she said, leading the way in. "By the time you eat and clean up the sun's going to be down. Better stay here all night"—she turned, her eyes twinkling—"unless you planned on putting up at the hotel."

"I think it would be nicer here, thank you," he said and grinned.

That night as he lay down in the soft feather bed Mrs. Flitcroft fixed for him upstairs, he whispered to the darkness, "Someday I'll repay her. I'll never forget her."

When he set out again in the morning, his trousers had been neatly mended and their pockets stuffed with food. The sunlight was brand new again, his shadow long and blue ahead of him once more. He followed it, moving more swiftly now, hurrying toward the beckoning horizon.

At the next town he bought a penny postcard and addressed it to his mother. "Dear Ma," he wrote, "I am on my way to Galveston, Texas. I will be home in about a year. My best regards to all. Your truant son, Erich Weiss."

Sometimes he rode the freight cars again; most of the time he walked. He stopped at other farmhouses as he traveled southward, doing chores for food and a place to sleep. He stopped in towns where there was a small show place or a dime museum and offered to do his magic tricks.

"My name is Eric the Great," he said by way of introduction. "You can tie me up with ropes and I can get free."

Now and then, after he had demonstrated his skill, he would be hired for a short time. A twelve-year-old magician was a show in itself. But as often as not he had to turn from magic to ordinary jobs: washing dishes in a restaurant, carrying swill to a farmer's pigs, helping a housewife beat her carpets.

He kept going toward the south, and then instead

of turning westward he began to head east. He could swing along at a fast pace on the road now, his muscles strengthening with the demands he made on them. Fresh air and sunlight and freedom gave him a feeling of well-being and increasing confidence. He had not found any heaps of gold yet, but he was finding other things: the look of the country at sunset and under the stars, the kindness of some persons, the cruelty of others. He had learned many lessons through trial and error. Best of all, he could sometimes do the work he longed to do.

At a small circus along the way he found a job doing tricks in a sideshow. One day while he was performing, Erich challenged a county constable to tie him up.

The constable laughed heartily at the idea and then produced a pair of handcuffs. "I'll tie you up, all right, young fellow. Let's see you work your way out of these!"

Erich eyed the cuffs nervously. It had been hard work picking the lock of the cuffs of the prisoner back at Appleton when he had had both hands free to work with. Most important, he didn't want the crowd to stand grinning at him while he tried to release himself. Also, it wouldn't be "magic" if they saw him pick the lock. If he could hold the pick in his teeth . . .

He held his hands out. "All right, I'll do it. Only I have to work at it in secret, behind this curtain here."

The constable looked behind the curtain to see that nobody was hiding there to help Erich. He nodded. "Go to it."

There were good-natured chuckles and laughs as Erich stepped behind the curtain. The grins had scarcely had time to fade when Erich reappeared, carry-

ing the opened handcuffs. The crowd gaped and then applauded.

The sound of applause sent a thrill through Erich. Handcuffs . . . he thought. They had been the secret of his success. Perhaps he should concentrate on them in the future. Now he saw his name in lights proclaiming ERIC THE HANDCUFF KING.

But at the end of the week the job was over and the only lights were those of the stars or the steady glow of the sun rolling overhead as he started walking the roads again, his pack on his shoulders. Whenever he earned a little more money than he needed for himself, he sent it home, enclosing short letters in which he told his folks not to worry about him, asking them to write to him in turn, and telling them where to mail their letters in order to reach him.

It was a lonely life at times, especially when autumn rains began to beat down and chill winds sent leaves scattering across the land. When he was lucky he had a berth with some carnival troupe; at other times a bed in a hayloft had to do. With the coming of winter it was necessary to find indoor jobs. Sometimes these were jobs where he could use his increasing skill at magic. Wherever he went he questioned professional performers and tried to learn their tricks. Often the jobs were ones that anybody with a pair of hands and a willingness to work could do.

He had been gone from home almost a year when he received a letter from his mother—a letter sent several weeks before—saying that his father had gone to New York in the hope of finding better employment there. Later, the letter said, the rest of the family would join Pa in New York. Like all his mother's letters, this

one was filled with expressions of love and concern. Erich could almost hear her voice saying, "You have been gone long enough, my son. You are too young to be so far away. We will have a better life in New York, Erich. There will surely be many places there where you can do what you want to do."

New York. New York, where Barnum had built his mighty Hippodrome and where, now, at Madison Square Garden, Barnum and his partner James Bailey were presenting "The Greatest Show on Earth." Broadway. Coney Island. Tony Pastor's theatre.

A spring wind ruffled Erich's hair and brought fresh color into his cheeks as he put his mother's letter into his pocket. His pockets were still empty of gold. And he was not famous yet. But a year was a long, long time to be away from home and family love.

He caught a ride with a farmer heading northward.

"Where're you heading to, son?" the farmer asked.

"New York," Erich answered. "Home."

Erich's arrival in New York was not at all as he had pictured it. The city was larger than he had ever dreamed. Finding his way through its noisy maze of streets was far different from wandering over country roads. It took him hours to find the address his mother had given to him in the letter and when he finally knocked at the door of a small flat on the upper East side, his father alone greeted him.

"Where's Ma and the rest?" Erich asked, looking around the silent, poorly lighted rooms.

"They aren't here yet. I have to get the money together for their train fare first."

When he had recovered from his disappointment,

Erich put his mind to thinking of ways to help earn the needed money. His father told him that he had opened a small school for teaching Hebrew and the Talmud.

"Maybe I could help you," Erich suggested. "I know a little Hebrew from what you taught me."

"Perhaps," Dr. Weiss said though he did not look too hopeful. "One thing you could do is to help me with this." He handed Erich a child's first reader in English and smiled ruefully. "I'm going to school too."

Erich looked at the book, reading the simple words printed there: "book . . . dog . . . house . . . cat . . ." He felt a rush of admiration and sympathy as he thought of his father, a scholar, struggling to learn a new language at sixty-four.

"My English ain't—" Erich corrected himself, "isn't very good. But I can teach you some things. And I can look for a job."

In the days that followed, Erich scarcely had time to think about anything except trying to help his father at the school while he hunted for a job for himself. He finally found work as a messenger. The pay was low and every penny had to be saved toward making a family reunion possible. Whenever he passed Tony Pastor's "Palace" on East 14th Street he studied the exciting acts advertised at the building's entrance—minstrel shows, comedy, dancing, magic. All the great names of the day played at Pastor's theatre. But it cost money to see the shows. Erich always walked away, trying to console himself with the thought of the free entertainment that was available in his own neighborhood. There was the Pastime Athletic Club, where a fellow could meet new friends. And there were the

second-hand book stalls that he had discovered. Some of the books were about magic. You could stand and read them even if you couldn't afford to buy any.

He and his father slowly accumulated enough money to send to Appleton. When Mrs. Weiss and the family, which now included a little sister, arrived at the flat, Erich felt that all the work and waiting and sacrifice had been worth while. The small flat rang with their voices and laughter as everybody tried to talk at once.

"Ach, how you've grown!" Erich's mother cried over and over, hugging him to her, then making him stand back so she could look him up and down.

Theo, as shy as a stranger, hung back at first, staring at Erich as if he were a being from another world. Then, when he could make his voice heard above those of the others, he asked, "Are you going to get a job with Barnum and Bailey now, Erich?"

Erich shrugged, pretending that he had not given the idea any thought. "I might, sometime, while I'm trying to get into the really big time."

"You mean The Greatest Show on Earth isn't big enough for you?" his oldest brother challenged. "I guess your head has grown in the last year as well as the rest of you."

Erich ignored the remark. "I'm going to work for Richter's down on Broadway."

"Doing magic?" Theo questioned excitedly.

"Magic with a pair of scissors," Erich confessed. "I'm going to be a necktie cutter."

The others looked at him in surprise.

"That sounds like a good steady job," Mrs. Weiss said approvingly and with a hint of relief. She got up, searched through a pile of suitcases, opened one and

started tying an apron around her waist. "I'd better get at my job of finding something to eat." In a moment she was busy in the kitchen, rattling cans and boxes and cutlery.

"Aren't you going to be a magician any more, Erich?" Theo asked.

Erich stood up and walked to the window. He looked down into the court where clothes fluttered on pulley lines and two husky women stood on a back porch arguing at the tops of their voices.

"Of course I am," Erich said. But as he looked out at the little scrap of sky that showed above the court, he wondered if he was just listening to himself talk. There were lots of magicians. A person had to be better than all the rest to get attention. And in order to be a real professional you needed professional equipment, and that was expensive.

He turned back to the warmth of his family and to the smell of pancakes frying on a griddle in the kitchen. One thing he could do was to show Ma and the rest around New York. They would need a guide at first. He, he thought with pride, would be a good one.

Suddenly he remembered something, and trotted to the kitchen. "Ma, there's a club here I'm going to join. The Pastime Athletic Club, they call it. I'm thinking of taking up running. I'm pretty fast even though my legs aren't very long."

"Just so you don't run away again," his mother said.

He laughed. "The thing is, I need some short pants for running. I might even win some medals."

She turned a pancake and asked, "A medal for the pants or for the running?"

"Maybe both. Anyhow, I'm pretty sure I can win something."

She looked at him, touching his dark, thick hair, studying the fine-featured face that was so much like her own. "*Ja,* you will, Erich. You will win something. It is there in your eyes." She smiled. "I will make you a beautiful pair of pants. Out of red Karsha satin. There is some in my trunk. Just enough, I think."

When he went to bed that night, crowding in beside Theo, he pictured himself not on a stage but on a race track, racing far ahead of everyone else, with the red trunks gleaming.

HOUDINI

Erich stood sweating in the bright red trunks. He had just won his first race with the Athletic Club. Other boys in the junior division watched with envy as one of the club's sponsors pinned a small, engraved medal on Erich's shirt.

One of the boys stepped over to Erich. He had been second in the race. "The way you jumped ahead of me at the finish line was like magic, Erich."

"That's me," Erich said somewhat cockily, grinning at Joseph Rinn. Joseph had joined the club about the same time Erich had but so far their relationship had been confined to trying to outdo each other in the races. "That's what I am. A magician."

"You are! Well, so am I."

Erich looked at Joseph skeptically. "What can you do?"

"Plenty. Sleight of hand. Card tricks. Magic hat. I'll show you. Come on over to my house after we're dressed. What kind of magic can you do?"

"Most anything," Erich said, still cocky. Seeing the friendly curiosity in the other boy's eyes, he added more humbly, "Only, I don't have the right stuff to work with."

"I know where you can buy it, all you want. The people who own the shop are good friends of mine. Francis and Antonio Martinka. I've brought all sorts of stuff there. You ought to see it."

Erich's cockiness changed to envy when he stood in Joseph's room later and looked at all the magical apparatus the other boy owned. Joseph's father was well-to-do, he discovered, the manager of a hotel, and Joseph's allowance was almost as much as Erich made in a week of work as a tie cutter at Richter's. He had worked at the factory for over a year now and it seemed to him that he was getting nowhere.

"Here are some envelopes for mind-reading tricks," Joseph said, showing him a set of envelopes with double flaps and concealed slits. "And here's a box made especially for the vanishing card trick. And here's a slate with a cloth bag for when you do magic writing. And here . . ."

Erich felt dizzy as Joseph went on displaying all his wares. His hands ached with the desire to possess some of the objects himself. "Mind if I try a few?" he asked.

"Go ahead."

As Erich quickly mastered the secrets of the various gadgets, Joseph watched with increasing respect. "Say, you are good. Have you ever done any performing in a regular show?"

"I've worked in sideshows already," Erich bragged. "Only, lately—well, mostly I've done a little entertaining for some of the clubs and groups my folks belong to. Sometimes my younger brother, Theo, works with me."

"Look—maybe you and I could work up an act together," Joseph suggested.

Erich hesitated, thinking of Theo. Theo might be hurt if he decided to work with a new boy. Still, this was an opportunity he couldn't pass up. "All right," he said, and in a moment the two were deep in plans.

It was the beginning of many such hours together, whenever Erich was free from his job. Sometimes he and Joseph succeeded in getting their names on printed programs in local amateur talent shows for civic and social groups, and these Erich carefully saved and pasted in a scrapbook. Erich and Theo still appeared together, too, and sometimes Erich appeared alone as "Eric the Great" or as "Cardo," the wizard at card tricks.

Between times, Erich put on his red trunks and ran more races in the club, winning other medals. He was determined to build up his body in every way he could, by running, by doing gymnastics with Theo, and by swimming in the club's pool. He became a powerful swimmer, and developed the ability to stay under water for such long periods of time that the other swimmers were awed.

Joseph was a very serious-minded athlete, too, and one day he said, "Erich, let's make a vow to each other that we'll never drink or smoke as long as we live. Swear to it."

"I swear on my honor," Erich said solemnly, gripping Joseph's hand. Whatever Joseph did or did not do in the future, Erich knew that he himself would always keep the vow.

In spite of his physical training, Erich did not grow as tall as he wanted to be. He hoped to be at least six feet tall but at fifteen he was still only about five-feet-five.

Short or not, he had won a good many medals as a runner. He decided to have his picture taken with the medals fastened in place. When he put them on in front of Theo, Theo said, "You ought to have a couple more. Make it look good." Together they created a few extra medals out of cardboard.

Later, when Erich was sending one of the photographs to a friend, he wrote on the back, "Most of the medals are real, too."

In the meantime he had met another boy who was interested in magic, Jack Hayman. Jack's dreams of being a famous conjurer were as big as Erich's. He and Erich borrowed books from the public library or loitered around the dusty second-hand bookstalls where wonderful volumes called *Modern Magic* or *Lives of the Famous Wizards* were available.

Poring over the books, Erich's imagination flared as he read of the great Frenchman, Chabert, whom no flames could burn, who drank boiling oil and licked hot pokers and stayed in ovens hot enough to roast meat. How had he done it? Erich asked himself over and over. What was the secret of such seemingly miraculous stunts? He read of Cliquot, a French Canadian, who could swallow fourteen nine-inch bayonets at once; of a Londoner, Topham, who could lift an eight-hundred-pound stone with one hand; and of Jack the Viper who let himself be bitten by snakes without ill effect. How? What were the tricks involved? And how could he, Erich Weiss, learn the secrets and use them?

One thing he knew. No man could actually drink burning oil and live. No one could stay in an oven where the heat roasted meat and not be roasted too.

And there were limits to human strength, as well as ways to make it seem that there were no limits. The answer was magic. Skill. Ingenuity.

He and Joseph and Jack argued about the means that famous magicians had used, and discussed the possible ways that the seeming miracles had been accomplished.

"Sword swallowers actually do swallow swords," Joseph said. "Only, they have to train themselves and be careful. Sometimes they have accidents and cut their throats."

Erich nodded. "Once Theo tied me up in fishline and went off and left me with the line tied around my throat, and I almost choked to death before I got free. I had to use my—" He stopped short. He had started to say that he had used his toes to untie the knots but he thought better of it. Part of a magician's secret of success was keeping certain things to himself. "—use all my strength to get free," he finished. Something else he had learned from that incident was that the thinner the cord used to tie him, the harder it was to get free. Thin cord like a fishline or wrapping twine could be tied into very tight knots; knots in a thick rope were much easier to undo.

"I don't think the strong-man acts are fakes either," Joseph said. "Not all of them. What about that man who used to let people put a big stone on his chest and then let them hit it with a hammer?"

"Simple," Erich said. "The bigger the stone the easier it is. It's something to do with what's called inertia. The stone takes all the weight of the hammer and spreads it around so the person underneath doesn't get the full force."

"I wouldn't want to try it, just the same," Jack said.

Erich said nothing. He wasn't absolutely sure that he was right, although he had read it in a book that explained a few such tricks. Still, if Jack or Joe tried the stunt and got their ribs smashed he didn't want to be responsible. Stunts like that were a good deal different from pulling things out of a hat. You could get hurt if you didn't know what you were doing.

"I don't believe any of that inertia stuff," Joseph remarked. "I think some of the great magicians were really wizards and that they had super powers other people don't have."

The boys were in Joseph's room and Joseph jumped up and got a book from a shelf. "Here's a book that tells all about it. Some people can even talk with spirits."

Erich looked at the book and then tossed it aside. "There's a scientific explanation for everything. Who believes in ghosts?"

"I do!" Joseph said earnestly. "And lots of other people do, too."

Erich and Joseph had their first real argument. Finally, when their tempers had cooled, Erich said, "You can think what you want to, but I'm going to try to find the real answers. Anyhow, let's not argue any more. I have to go home and practice for the show I'm doing at Schillerbund Hall next week." He looked wistfully at Joseph's rack of magic supplies. "I guess I'll just have to appear as Cardo again and do card tricks."

"I thought you were going to buy some things at Martinka's."

"I changed my mind," Erich said, fingering his empty pockets.

He left, his spirits gloomy as he made his way home-

ward. The family was getting along pretty well now. Nat and the other boys had found jobs and were helping out financially. Even so, he never seemed to have enough money to do more than buy a few books now and then and keep himself in decent clothes. Not that his clothes ever looked decent. Somehow, they never seemed to fit right. Or, if they did, he managed to get them wrinkled and baggy almost the minute Ma handed them to him fresh from the pressing board.

He looked up at the narrow strip of sky above the crowded buildings. The stars seemed very far away—much farther than they had seemed those nights when he had been sleeping in a field or a hayloft three years ago. Three years! The realization shook him. He would soon be sixteen and here he was, still an assistant cutter laboring over yards and yards of tie lining, earning scarcely more than when he had started. He would just have to try to make more money by performing. But first he needed some professional equipment.

There was a sound of footsteps behind him. He turned to see Joseph running after him, with the street lamp lighting up Joseph's face.

"Erich," Joseph said when he caught up with him, "I knew you probably wouldn't want to talk in front of Jack—about buying equipment. It's on account of money, isn't it?"

"Well—" Erich said, embarrassed.

"If you really want to get some stuff, I could lend you the money."

Erich's defenses fell. "Would you! I'd pay you back as soon as I could. With the equipment I'll have a better chance to put my show on more often. Gee, Joe, you're a true friend!"

"Just a fellow magician," Joseph said with a grin. "See you tomorrow after work at Martinka's place. I'll have the money with me." He trotted off.

"Thanks," Erich called after him, his voice echoing against the buildings. Heading for home again, he broke into a fast sprint, racing a trolley all the way. He outdistanced it easily and as he turned into the flat he gave a final glance at the stars. They looked much closer now.

The show at the Schillerbund hall was a success. Erich, wearing a black suit and a black bow tie, faced the friendly audience with confidence. Then he removed his jacket, loosened his shirt cuffs and pushed his white shirt sleeves up on his forearms. On the table beside him were his new pieces of equipment: a goblet with a false bottom, a small cabinet with mirrors, a cardboard "dyeing" tube for changing the colors of silk handkerchiefs, and other contrivances. He had spent the week practicing with the new gadgets so that he could manipulate them with ease. No matter how clever a magician's props were, he had to know how to handle them with equal cleverness.

The audience applauded enthusiastically, genuinely entertained by the handsome boy on the stage before them. They had watched amateur magicians before but none was so serious and determined looking. And, in spite of a little clumsiness here and there, none had been so skillful.

Erich went home with the applause ringing in his ears. There were some coins ringing in his pocket, too. Tomorrow he would pay some of his debt to Joseph

Rinn. With what he had left over he would buy a book at the second-hand stalls.

Almost the first book Erich picked up on the following day was a volume called *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin, Ambassador, Author, and Conjurer, Written by Himself.* The book had been published in 1860. Erich leafed through it, his glance catching on sentences and paragraphs that made his heart quicken with a new excitement. "How to gain public applause . . . The artificial man . . . The throat of a mechanical nightingale . . . The fiirst magician in France . . ." He found himself reading in detail just how the author had performed a certain trick—and on another page was another description. One secret after another!

Erich's hands trembled as he paid the few coins needed to buy the volume. With the book under his arm he ran home, as elated as an explorer who had just sighted the dim coast of an unknown country.

He scarcely took time to eat his supper that night, and as soon as he left the supper table he hurried to his room and opened the book. He was still reading, with the help of the gas flame, when Theo came into the room several hours later and crawled into bed.

"Aren't you going to bed soon, Erich?" Theo asked sleepily, turning away from the light.

Erich did not answer. He was deep in the new, wonderful world he had discovered, a world where orange trees sprang out of tables and sprouted blossoms, leaves, and real fruit in the twinkling of an eye; a world where toys wrote answers to questions at the magician's bidding; where beautiful women floated through the air. Marvel followed marvel on the pages written by Robert-Houdin, but the most remarkable part of all was that

the answers to the mysteries were there—answers to questions that Erich had puzzled over for years.

Theo burrowed deeper into his pillow and slept. Erich read on, his mood of excitement changing to one of awe. To be like Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin! Was it possible? This man was no ordinary side show conjurer. He was an artist, a gentleman who had performed always in faultless evening attire, dignified and stately, at a time when other magicians had dressed themselves more like clowns than artists. He had performed before kings and queens. Ordinary feats—licking red-hot pokers, or eating glass, or dancing barefooted on swordblades—were nothing to him.

Thrilled, Erich read on, as Robert-Houdin described his trip to Algiers in 1856. When the magician stepped off the ship in his frock coat and plug hat, to face up to tests of magic before the Arabs, and before the French who were governors of Algeria, Erich felt that he himself was Robert-Houdin. He could all but smell the hot sand and the sea, and hear the cries of the native conjurers as they came with their baskets of snakes and their glass and swords. He, Erich Weiss, performed one miracle after another before the native magicians. And then, one dawn in the interior of Africa, came the breathless climax when he stood waiting for one of the native sorcerers to fire a pistol at him at fifteen paces.

The Arab took aim. Erich-Weiss-Houdin felt the bullet come zinging toward his mouth. He clicked his teeth together. The bullet was there, safe between his teeth! What a trick . . .

But that was not all. Incredulous, Erich read on. Now his hero was turning to the Arab and saying, "I

will show you that my aim is more dangerous than yours." He reloaded the pistol, pointed it at a white wall behind him, and fired. A splash of blood appeared on the bare wall!

The crowd shivered. The native magicians who had tried to stir up trouble against their French masters crept away, terrified of the great French sorcerer.

Erich let his breath out in wonder. He turned another page. Some parts he read a second time. Hour after hour went by. The gas jet sang and flickered; Theo cried out once in a dream; down in the street a rattling milk wagon went by. Erich heard nothing and knew nothing but the book in his hands. Over and over he said Robert-Houdin's name to himself. What were the others compared with him? What, indeed, was Eric the Great? Nothing. For here was a prince, a great example, a guide for his own life.

Reverently, he vowed to take Robert-Houdin as his model and his hero. He, like Robert-Houdin, would give new dignity to the art of magic. He would rescue it from the cheap side shows and dime museums and beer halls and make of it a profession that even his scholarly father would be proud of. Often, Jack Hayman had accused him of being too serious when he was performing before an audience. "You're too—well, sort of sober and dignified," Jack had said. "Crowds like an actor to be more jolly and light about things. You'll have to learn that before you can be a real showman."

Maybe. Part of the trouble was that he was nervous and shy. Even so, being the kind of magician Erich wanted to be was a serious undertaking. It could be a lifelong endeavor.

He raised his head, filled with a sense of dedication. Startled, he realized that the sky was light outside.

The door opened and his mother called, "Time to get up, boys." She looked in. "Why, Erich! Up and dressed already?"

He looked at her and blinked. "Morning? But I——"

Her gaze fixed on the unrumpled side of the bed beside Theo, the pillow undented.

"I've been reading," Erich said. "I guess I forgot to go to bed."

Mrs. Weiss put her hand to her forehead, speechless, staring at her son.

That day Erich yawned over and over at the big cutting table. Several times he caught himself on the verge of napping even as his scissors went slashing through the cloth before him. The foreman spoke to him sharply, for the first time in Erich's employment, and Erich forced himself to pay more attention. It would be a disgrace to be fired. If he quit, that was another matter. But did he dare to quit? What if all the big dreams of last night were just dreams?

When he left the shop for the day he hunted up his friends Jack and Joseph and told them about Robert-Houdin's *Memoirs*.

"I'm thinking about quitting my job before long," Erich said. "I want to start being a magician in earnest."

Joseph looked thoughtful. "If you do quit, Erich, you ought to get Richter's to give you a written recommendation just in case you ever need another job."

"I'm not worried," Erich said out of his new-found confidence.

"What are you going to call yourself?" Jack asked. "Eric the Great as usual?"

"I don't know yet. The important thing is I want to be like Robert-Houdin. I couldn't use his name, of course, but if I could think of something like it . . ."

"I know!" Jack interrupted. 'He was a Frenchman, you said. When you add an 'i' to a word in French it means 'like.' If you added an 'i' to the name 'Houdin' it would mean *like* Houdin. Houdini."

"What do you know about French?" Joseph challenged.

'Well—maybe I don't know everything," Jack admitted. "Just the same, Houdini would make a swell name. Even if it doesn't mean 'like Houdin.' The important thing is that Erich *wants* to be like him."

"Hoo-dee-nee," Erich said, pronouncing it as it sounded. He tried the name over several times. "Houdini. That's it! That's what I'll be."

At home that evening he took his scrapbook and carefuly scratched out the name Erich Weiss on the cover and printed in its place, in large letters, his new name: HOUDINI. He looked at it thoughtfully. He would have to work hard to earn the right to such a proud name. But he would earn it, no matter what sacrifices were needed, and someday the whole world would know that it was rightfully his.

ACID ON SILK

Over a side show tent at the Chicago World's Fair in the summer of 1893 appeared a sign announcing THE HOUDINI BROTHERS. Inside, a dark-haired young man of nineteen who had named himself Harry Houdini was demonstrating a trick he called "Metamorphosis." His evening clothes were cheap and ill-fitting. As he stood in front of a trunk on the stage with his brother Theo beside him, he could hear the noises of the midway through the canvas walls—a bedlam of barkers, bagpipes, yodels, Javanese bells, Chinese gongs, venders, Sioux Indians, Turks, Laplanders, and the cries of wild animals in Hagenbeck's Animal Show.

He had just finished his handcuff-escape act but the applause had been disappointing; the audience had seen performers escape from handcuffs before. Although Houdini used regulation cuffs, while others often used fake ones with hidden springs which were easily released, most people could not tell the difference.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the young magician now announced soberly, "I will permit my brother to tie my hands while you watch. I will then step into this

trunk, which he will lock and rope shut. Then, presto, I will escape."

Theo stepped forward with boyish eagerness. He wore trousers with a gold stripe along one side, and there was gold braid on his dark jacket. Concentrating fiercely, he tied Houdini's hands behind his back. Then when Houdini had got into the trunk, Theo lowered the lid, locked it, and bound the trunk with rope.

A pair of curtains whisked shut and Theo stepped back behind them just as they closed. Almost at once Houdini appeared in front of the curtains, his hands free. He gestured dramatically, recited a magic phrase, and pulled the curtain open. He stepped over to the trunk which was still locked and roped. He opened the trunk and there, with his hands bound behind his back, was Theo!

The applause for this stunt was far greater than for any other. Listening to it, bowing, Houdini marveled that a mere trick that almost anyone with some muscular agility could do with the help of a fake box with one trick board in it, should be the most popular number of the act. Far harder tricks which demanded real skill, such as card manipulations or the escapes from handcuffs, brought only feeble applause. Someday, he promised himself, he would be recognized for the skills that he really prided himself on. For the time being he had to do what the public and his employer wanted. Otherwise there would be no money to send home to the family or to support Theo and himself.

This was a pretty good job, he knew, better than any other he had managed to get in the time since he had left Richter's, and he wanted to keep it until the Fair was over.

As he finished the act with sleight-of-hand tricks he thought briefly of all the other small jobs he had had since he had started on a professional career: first, jobs that he and Jack Hayman had done together, then performances with Joseph Rinn—carnivals, firemen's balls, shows in schools and on street corners. Whether performed with Jack or Joseph, the shows had always been billed under the name of The Houdini Brothers. Now, with Theo acting with him, the "brothers" part of the title was really true.

At the conclusion of the show, the audience filed out in search of other entertainments along the two-mile midway or among the numerous exhibition buildings beyond. Houdini and Theo removed their props and stored them in the small side tent reserved for them, and then they went out to join the throngs.

"Let's go over to the Ferris wheel, Erich—I mean Harry," Theo said.

Houdini stood looking toward the Sioux Village, where a group of Indians was doing a war dance in front of Sitting Bull's cabin. "Don't you ever get tired of riding on the Ferris wheel?" he asked. "We haven't seen even half of the Fair yet. Let's go watch the Hindu jugglers."

Theo grinned. "Don't you ever get tired of watching the jugglers?"

"Let's compromise and walk over to the electricity building."

"How about the palace of mechanic arts?"

Houdini took out his pocket watch. "Wherever we're going we'd better get started. There's only an hour before our next show." He held the watch a moment longer than necessary, remembering how often his father had held it in just this way, cupped in the palm

of his hand. A week before Pa had died he had held it so, watching the second hand move around the dial while he said, "Remember your pledge, my son, always to look after your mother when I am gone."

"A whole year ago . . ." Houdini thought, his eyes misting. It was still hard to believe that Pa was really gone. Maybe, Houdini reflected, his father had made all the other boys in the family vow the same thing. Still, he felt that his father had singled him out and that it was up to him alone to be responsible for his mother.

He turned to see Theo still looking wistfully toward the gigantic Ferris wheel. With all the attractions to be seen at the great exhibition, Theo, like thousands of others, was most fascinated by the new amusement wheel built by George Ferris. The wheel soared high over everything else at the Fair, two hundred and sixty-four feet high, the highest wheel of its kind ever built. Each of its thirty-six observation cars was twenty-six feet long and thirteen feet wide, and it could hold sixty passengers. At night when the thousands of electric lights on the wheel were turned on it looked like a tremendous spider web spinning against the sky.

"Oh, all right, Dash," Houdini said with a smile. "Let's go." He steered Theo toward the Ferris wheel. "I really like it too."

Once they were in one of the huge, steel cars they could see over the entire exhibition grounds. Twilight was coming on when their car reached the top of the wheel. The red rays of the sun gilded every roof and turret. The Fair was a world of magic in itself, Houdini thought. There were buildings representing nations all over the world and each state in the United States, each trying to outdo the other in splendor. Even the Liberty

Bell had been brought from Philadelphia to Chicago for the exposition. And President Grover Cleveland had come to touch the electric button which officially signaled the opening of the Fair. On the lake were reproductions of Viking ships and of Columbus's Santa Maria. Now, in the twilight, statues and flags, model factory buildings, fountains, and exhibit halls began to glow with the marvelous new magic of electricity.

The Ferris wheel made two revolutions and then the trip was over. Silently, Houdini led the way back past the midway shows to the place where the Hindu jugglers performed.

"I thought you wanted to visit some of the exhibits," Theo teased.

"Tomorrow," Houdini said, and they laughed knowingly together.

By the time the Fair was over, Houdini and Theo had managed to explore most of the exhibition grounds and a good deal of Chicago itself. Unemployed again, they sought for another job but managers and agents shook their heads.

"We'd better go back to New York," Theo suggested at last.

"We'll find something here," Houdini said. "We just have to keep looking. Something will turn up."

"Maybe," Theo said without spirit. "Just the same, I'd rather go back to New York. It's—warmer there."

"Warmer?" Houdini looked at Theo closely. The wind coming off the lake had a winter chill in it, true, but the wind off the Hudson or the East River in New York in winter could be just as cold. And then he understood: Theo was homesick. He put his arm over Theo's shoulder. "You go back home, Dash. I don't want to

give up here yet. But you go ahead if you want to."

"I want to—only if I do you can't appear as The Houdini Brothers any more. I don't want to run out on you."

Houdini faced the wind, drawing his thin coat collar up around his neck. Past the Fair buildings, empty and forlorn-looking now, he saw the glimmer of the lake and the gulls wheeling. "Don't worry. I'll bill myself as Harry Houdini, Handcuff King and Escape Artist. And I'll get a job somewhere."

A week later Theo was on his way back to New York and Houdini had found work at one of Chicago's famous dime museums, Kohl and Middleton's. He was to do twenty shows a day for twelve dollars a week, appearing in the Hall of Freaks and Miracle Workers. All the performers presented their acts simultaneously, the spectators moving from act to act as they pleased.

It was like being with the troupe in Hoeffler's Circus all over again, Houdini often thought as he mingled with the "freaks"—fat ladies, sword swallowers, Siamese twins, jugglers, the "alligator boy," the "bird girl," and the rest. But the pay was much better now and he was able to send most of his salary home. Also, he had an opportunity to study the techniques and showmanship of a fellow worker who was a well-known magician, Horace Goldin, one of the stars at the museum.

Houdini sought out the other magician one day and introduced himself. "I've been watching your act, Mr. Goldin," he said, "and I think it's great. I'm a magician myself. I was hoping—I thought maybe I could talk to you a little about a new idea of mine and that we could discuss things——"

The other magician's cold, leveling stare cut him

short. "I? I exchange ideas with *you?*" Goldin's lip curled. "Do you know how much I make on the theatre stage here? Seventy-five dollars a week, young man, and you make twelve! I don't have any need for your ideas." He stalked away.

Houdini's cheeks smarted as if he had been slapped. Walking back to his own platform in the hall, he felt fresh gratitude toward the other, more humble performers there. All of them, from the fire-eater to the strong man, were willing to talk to him and give him pointers on how to be a better showman. But Goldin . . . "I'll never forgive him," Houdini thought. "Never. Someday he'll be glad to exchange ideas with me!"

But "someday" seemed very far away when, after a short engagement, his job at Kohl and Middleton's ended.

"We need a fresh program at regular intervals," the manager explained. "You did a good job, kid, but I've got to find a new entertainer now for variety."

Kid! Discouraged, Houdini found himself walking the cold streets again, haunting the theatrical agencies, and counting the little money he had managed to save.

One day when a fresh blast of lake wind and snow struck his cheek and the snow settled on his shoulders and hat, he thought: "Maybe Theo was right. Maybe it is colder here." He turned, looking eastward. Yes, he would go home, too, and try his luck in New York again. He could try to get jobs along the way so that he would arrive home with money in his pockets and some more show experience behind him. If worst came to worst he could go back to necktie cutting again, but that

would be a step backward—a long step he wouldn't take unless there was no other way.

A June wind blew along the New York street and on one corner a flower vender stood waving a bouquet of carnations. "Cheap!" he cried. "Buy a flower for your lady. Buy a dozen! Here, miss, a flower for your dress—" He held the carnations out to a slim, tiny, dark-haired girl of eighteen who was walking by with an older woman.

The girl paused. "Could I, Mother?" she asked the woman with her. "They are cheap."

"We've enough foolishness tonight as it is, Beatrice. And if we have to go on to this ridiculous performance, we'd at least better be there in time."

Beatrice Rahner gave the flower vender a wistful glance and followed her mother, noticing the neat patch on the hem of her mother's skirt. It had been stupid to think of buying a flower when there was so little money for anyone in the family. Still, it would have looked nice with her new dress, the first new dress she had had in a year. She hurried to keep pace with her mother. The school building where the night's entertainment was to be held was just a block away but, as her mother had said, they didn't want to be late. Furthermore, Beatrice didn't want to risk having her mother turn back altogether, as she might do if she became impatient. Foolishness and a complete waste of time was what her mother called the magic show scheduled at the school.

"Shows are wicked," Mrs. Rahner had insisted as Beatrice had pleaded with her to go. "Not fit for the eyes of young women."

With eight other girls and only one boy in the family, Beatrice thought, there wouldn't be much going to shows for anyone. Even a Punch and Judy show was wicked in her mother's opinion. In fact, it seemed to Beatrice sometimes that the only thing her mother wholly approved of was going to Mass regularly and saying the rosary every night while the family sat around in a circle. Perhaps it was because Mother was a widow now and felt she had to be doubly strict.

Just the same, Mother had given in tonight and Beatrice was grateful. At the school house door Beatrice gave herself a swift glance in the mirror near the entrance, setting her wide-brimmed hat straight on her dark mass of hair and adjusting the cameo brooch pinned to her high collar. There was a piece of lint on the skirt of her new silk dress and she flicked it off. It was the first time she had worn the dress and she was still half dazzled by its splendor.

Her mother, dressed in black, led the way into the large room where the show was to be held, marching toward the front row. Following close behind, Beatrice realized that in their eagerness not to be late they were almost the first ones there. Self-consciously, she took a seat beside her mother in the front row and stared straight ahead.

Only a few feet in front of her stood a table with metal legs. It had been set up on a makeshift platform that served as a small stage. On top of the table stood a number of strange objects: bells, a goblet, odd boxes, a deck of cards. A placard on the wall behind the table said THE GREAT HOUDINI.

The room filled slowly, with a rustling of women's gowns, a creaking of chairs, a low murmur of voices.

Beatrice felt her excitement mount. When a young man in evening clothes suddenly came through one of the side doors and walked with stiff dignity to the table in front of her, she drew in her breath sharply. Was this The Great Houdini? Why, he was scarcely older than she was. And so handsome! His eyes were as bright and blue-gray—with yellow lights in them—as the silk of her dress. She glanced at her mother, wanting to share her excitement, but her mother sat stone-faced, her nose already puckered in disapproval.

If the young man on the platform noticed Mrs. Rahner's disapproval he did not show it. Bowing, forcing a smile on his serious face, he began to display his magical tricks. Sometimes, as he turned or walked about in the course of his act, he came so close to Beatrice that his trouser cuff almost brushed against her clasped hands.

Beatrice watched spellbound as Houdini tore several sheets of colored paper into strips, dropped some of the strips on the floor, picked them up and then, wadding all the torn strips together, dropped them into a bowl of water. "Observe, my hands are empty," he said, demonstrating, before reaching into the bowl. And then, before her eyes, he pulled the paper from the bowl—yards of dry paper, all in one piece and made up of many colors.

"Oh!" she gasped involuntarily, and then clapped her hand to her mouth.

Houdini looked toward her. For an instant she had the queer feeling that they were all alone in the big room and that he was aware of no one but her. Blushing, she forced herself to look down at her lap. When she looked up again, the young man was making coins

appear and disappear, his hands working rapidly, his arms moving in swift, sure flourishes.

Again, between tricks, she fancied that he glanced toward her with interest. To regain a sense of reality and composure, she took her mother's hand and held it. Under a burst of applause, she dared to whisper, "Isn't he marvelous, Mother? He must be a genius."

Her mother answered only with a look of growing distrust in which was mingled uneasiness. Beatrice, herself, felt a few chills go down her spine as she recalled some of the weird stories her mother had told about witches and about people who had the power of the "evil eye." After all, hadn't her own sister Stella, four years older than she, told her about the evil eye, too? Stella had been engaged to be married and then, just before the wedding day, a witch, Stella had said, had cast an evil eye on her fiance and he had died. Nervously, Beatrice considered Houdini's eyes. They didn't look evil but they were extremely bright. Could it be that he performed his astonishing tricks with the help of ghostly powers? That was what her mother was thinking; she could tell by the expression on her mother's face.

"With the help of this magic liquid," Houdini was saying, "I will now demonstrate—" He took a step toward the table as he spoke, and reached for a glass containing a dark liquid. But his shirt sleeve caught against the fringed table cover and the glass tilted over toward the table edge. The liquid splashed out before the glass crashed to the floor.

Beatrice cried out and leaped to her feet, but the damage was already done. The dark liquid was dripping

down the front of her new dress, and its acid contents stained the cloth.

Red-faced and stammering apologies, the young magician leaped down from the platform and stood before her. He got down, brushing at her skirt with his handkerchief, and tried to rub away the spots. It was no use. The dress was ruined.

"That's all right—" Beatrice gasped. "You couldn't help it." But her voice was thick with dismay.

"Couldn't help it!" her mother cried at her side, pushing in between Beatrice and Houdini, her eyes flashing with indignation. She stormed at the young man. "You and your hocus-pocus! Now look what you've done! You've ruined my daughter's dress. You——"

"Mother—" Beatrice whispered, tugging at her.

"I'm sorry," Houdini repeated. "I'll do anything——"

Mrs. Rahner's temper increased and she scolded loudly. "I'm going to have you arrested. Yes, arrested!"

"Oh, please, Mother, let's go," Beatrice begged.

Other persons came forward, trying to intervene.

Beatrice saw that Houdini was standing beside her. Impulsively, she whispered, "Mother's just excited—I mean, don't pay any attention. I think—you're wonderful."

Again their eyes met and she forgot the dress, forgot her mother's anger, forgot everything but the young man looking at her.

"Do you?" Houdini whispered back. "Can I see you again? Where do you live?"

Beatrice hesitated and then, still feeling as if she were under a spell, told him.

The rest was a vague blur in her mind—her mother seizing her hand and pulling her along the aisle, rush-

ing her home to the accompaniment of more angry words about irresponsible performers ruining young girls' clothes and corrupting their moral standards.

Beatrice scarcely heard. That night as she went to bed with Stella she whispered, "I met the most wonderful person tonight, Stella. And he's coming to see me. He promised he would."

"What he promised and what he does may be two different things," Stella answered.

"But he will. I know he will."

"You've never had a beau," Stella argued. "I know how some of them are, Bess."

"He's different," Beatrice said. She stiffened, hearing a growl of distant thunder. A moment later there was a splash of rain on the roof, then a trembling yellow flash of lightning. She moved closer to Stella. Storms were bad omens. She said her prayers hastily, but even as she said them the memory of the handsome young magician kept intruding.

He had promised to call on her. Would he remember? Or would he forget all about it, as Stella seemed to think?

Thunder boomed across the roof and she shivered. When she and Stella were younger they had believed that storms came as a result of their doing wicked or naughty things. Stella still believed it. Beatrice, staring at the lightning-touched darkness, wondered. She hadn't done anything wicked—unless going to the school building to watch magic performed was wicked, as her mother said.

Wicked or not, she thought defiantly, she didn't care. She wanted to see The Great Houdini again.

THE MAGIC RING

There had never been such a beautiful June day, Houdini thought, as he walked swiftly along the street, studying house numbers. He had dressed up in his best clothes, with a new derby on his head, his shoes polished and a dapper tie at his throat. His heart kept pace with his swift footsteps as he reached the middle of the next block in a poorer section of Brooklyn. He stopped, looking at a small, shabby frame house with a tiny front yard. Yes, there was the address on the front. The right house at last!

He drew himself up and walked to the door. Would she be there? Did she expect him? Would she still be as shy and nervous as she had been last night? He brushed at his shoulders, set his hat at a new angle, and knocked.

The door opened and Mrs. Rahner stood there, scowling at him. "What do want here? Up to more tricks, are you?"

"No, ma'm." He tried to see over her shoulder into the room. "I want to have another dress made for the young lady to replace the one I spoiled. But I have to be sure that I have the right size. If you could give me the old one——"

"It isn't old. It's brand new. Or was before you slopped acid all over it."

"Well, may I have it, please? I'll bring—" He stopped, seeing a movement at one of the windows. A curtain fell back into place, but not before he saw Beatrice peering at him. "I'll bring it back with the new one," he continued to Mrs. Rahner, trying to keep from watching the window.

Mrs. Rahner was thoughtful, still regarding him with distrust, before she finally turned and went for the dress.

Houdini took a step toward the window where Beatrice had been. If only she would come out so that he could talk to her. She hadn't looked angry, from what little glimpse he had had of her before she ducked back behind the curtain.

"Well!" Mrs. Rahner's voice exclaimed as she returned to the doorway. "What are you trying to peek at?"

Guiltily, he hurried back to the door. "Nothing. I was admiring the flowers in your window box." He took the dress. "I'll bring it back as soon as I can, and the new one with it."

"See that you do. Now be off with you."

"Yes, ma'm." The door closed and he heard Mrs. Rahner's footsteps going toward the rear of the house where he judged the kitchen was.

The curtain at Beatrice's window moved again and, as he turned to go, there she was standing in full view. She smiled and waved.

Daringly, Houdini moved to the window and whispered through the screen, "Come on out. Won't you take a walk with me? Come on."

"I don't dare," she whispered back.

"What are you afraid of?"

She bit her lip, glanced behind her, and then signaled to him to wait.

The next minute she was beside him and they were walking down the street together.

"That was real magic," he said, "the way you got out of the house. Your mother must be awfully strict."

She looked about nervously and confessed, "It isn't that, so much. It's—I've never done such a thing before. I don't even know you, Mr. Houdini. I can't walk very far with you."

"It's not *Mr.* Houdini," he protested. "Just Houdini. Harry. What's your name?"

"Beatrice—although, mostly, they call me Bess."

"I used to call myself Eric the Great. That was my real name. But I changed it." He began telling her about Robert-Houdin, noticing how her eyes brightened as she listened and how the color came and went in her cheeks. She was really tiny, he realized. She made him feel much taller than his five-feet-eight and he liked the feeling. She was beautiful, too, with those dark, lively eyes and her quick smile. Only, she was still very nervous.

At the end of the block she said, "I'll have to go back now." She held out her hand. "It was nice of you to call about my dress."

"The new one will be even prettier," he promised. "Pink. That's what it will be."

"But—the other one was blue."

"Pink," Houdini said firmly. "That's the color for you." He smiled. She smiled back at him. Then she was gone.

He went on down the street with the blue dress under his arm, whistling softly. The day seemed more beautiful than ever.

A week later he was back at the small frame house again, with a package under his arm.

Once more Mrs. Rahner answered the door.

"I've brought the new dress," Houdini said. He did not go on to say that it was his mother who had made it, working night after night when the rest of her chores were done.

Mrs. Rahner nodded, took the package, and closed the door.

Houdini stood with his mouth open, staring at the latch that had clicked so firmly in his face. It was a very ordinary kind of latch—one he could open almost by looking at it. But this latch was one he dared not touch. Grimly, he waited, then walked into the yard. There was nothing for him to do but go, he realized. After all, Beatrice could have tried to answer the door, or at least appeared at the window as she had done before. She couldn't be as scared of her mother as all that, surely. She was eighteen. Old enough to be married, if she wanted to.

Disconsolate, he stood with his fists jammed into his pockets, looking wistfully toward the house. Maybe she just didn't care. Maybe she was indifferent.

His pride reasserted itself. All right, let her be indifferent. There were other girls in the world. He cocked his hat and started toward the gate at the end of the yard.

A window creaked open. "Wait!"

He spun around, his heart leaping.

"Aren't you going to wait and see how the dress fits?" Beatrice called.

"I'll wait forever!" The words spoke themselves and with amazement he realized that it was true. He was giddily, completely, head-over-heels in love with a girl he had met only a little over a week ago. The realization made him feel weak and marvelously strong at the same time. And the minutes that he spent standing waiting for her seemed the longest he had ever known.

Indoors, Beatrice Rahner stood in her room pulling the new pink dress over her head. What a conceited young man he was. Pink! As if he knew what color was best for her. But when she looked into the mirror she thought with surprise, "Maybe he does know!" She had never worn anything more flattering. Or was it just because her eyes were sparkling so, and the color of her cheeks was a perfect match for the pink frills of the dress?

A feeling of recklessness came over her. She could hear her mother at work in the rear room of the house. Dared she slip out and take another walk with Houdini? Indignation mingled with her recklessness. Her mother had had no right to slam the door in his face like that. He had done all he could to make matters right about the dress and yet Mother had treated him as if he were a servant or a scoundrel.

There were footsteps behind her and she turned to see one of her younger sisters peeking into the room. Beatrice snatched up her purse and hat. "Tell Mother I'm going out—and I don't know when I'll be back!"

She hurried down the stairs and out through the front door.

"The dress is wonderful and it just fits," she told

Houdini breathlessly, turning around to show him how it looked.

He looked at her, a new expression in his eyes. "You are wonderful," he said, and she heard his voice tremble.

Silently, they walked out of the yard and down the street together.

"What am I doing?" she thought, amazed at herself. She looked at Houdini out of the corner of her eye and saw that he was looking at her in the same way.

They laughed, and she took his arm when he offered it at the next corner.

Small white clouds raced over the blue sky. Girls on roller skates went by. Horses trotted past, drawing buggies. A few blocks from Beatrice's house they saw a crowd of Italians outside a church. Men and women and youngsters were crowding around a carriage. In the carriage sat a young girl in a bridal gown, her white veil swathing her face. Beside her sat a young man. As Houdini and Beatrice approached, the young man bent forward and kissed the girl while the crowd pelted the newly-married pair with flowers.

"Oh!" Beatrice said, taken out of herself. "Isn't she lovely!"

Houdini turned to her. There was a faint dew of perspiration on his upper lip. "Not as lovely a bride as you would be," he said.

He said it very earnestly, almost as if he were proposing—and she had thought he was shy! She looked deeper, seeing behind the shyness a kind of deep-seated daring and conviction. He *was* serious. There was no laughter in his eyes at this moment. Under his gaze she felt herself redden while her heart galloped. She

sought for words but could only stammer some foolish protest.

He laughed, and she did not know whether he was laughing at her or at himself or just because the world seemed brimming over with joy. "Let's go to Coney Island," he said. "It's lots of fun."

"I couldn't! My mother would be horrified."

"She's horrified, anyhow," he said with a grin. "Or will be when she's found out you've gone walking with a villain like me."

"You're not a villain."

"Then why won't you go to Coney Island with me?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't. I said I wouldn't dare."

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

She looked at him. "Aren't you afraid of anything?"

"No. Why should I be? Are you?"

"Lots of things," she admitted. "That storm last week —I'm scared to death of thunder."

"Thunder won't hurt you." His hand closed more firmly on her elbow. "And I won't. Come on, Bessie. It's scarcely past noon. There's lots of time."

Between his pleading and her own desire to see the wonders of the famous boardwalk at Coney Island, she gave in. Once they were on their way, she pushed back all her feeling of trepidation. She wasn't a prisoner. It was time she had a beau and went places where other people went. Now she could tell Stella that she, too, had been to Coney Island to see the sights. Only, she mustn't stay too long.

When they got to Coney Island she forgot about time entirely. Houdini pointed out all the places of interest—the grand hotels along Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach where famous politicians and members

of the sporting fraternity like Diamond Jim Brady lived; the large observation tower that had been moved from the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876; the roller coasters and the camera obscura. She enjoyed the light, the color, the blue glitter of water along the beach extending from Sheepshead Bay to Gravesend Bay, the boats, the trained sea lions, the water races.

When Houdini suggested that they take a ride on the gravity railway, where small cars went coursing down an undulating track from a high terminal to the ground below, she agreed immediately. Houdini's dash and daring was infectious. Once they were on the car, however, crowded in with eight other thrill-seeking passengers, her nerve failed. As the car moved downward it seemed to her that they must surely crash, and she turned and flung her arms around Houdini's neck.

"This isn't fast," he laughed, putting his arm firmly around her waist. "You should go on the new coaster." With his free hand he felt in his pocket. "It's only a nickel."

"I'd give a hundred dollars just to get off of this railway," she cried against the breeze washing her face, still clinging to him.

"Hang on to me," he said, his arm tightening around her. "I'll take care of you."

She closed her eyes, trusting, believing what he said. In spite of his slight appearance, he was truly strong. Stronger than her mother. Stronger than danger. Stronger than herself. She felt calmed. With Houdini she would never be afraid of anything again.

But when they left the railway, she saw that the sun had slid far over in the sky. The "lots of time" Houdini

had spoken of had vanished. It was late afternoon. By the time she got back to Brooklyn it would be dark!

"Let's ride the roller coaster," Houdini said, taking her hand and starting to pull her forward. "Then we'll go over to the shows. I've performed here. I can get us a free ticket——"

"I can't! Oh, it's so late, Harry. I have to go home."

"Aren't you going to stay and see the fireworks from the pavilion? There's a band, too. I'll take you home later, Bessie."

"No, no, I—" To her own surprise and embarrassment she burst into tears. "I just didn't realize how late it was getting. Mother will never forgive me. I've never been away from home before except on a short errand." She brushed at her tears. How ridiculous and silly he would think she was, he who had traveled all over. "She'll scold me and lock me in my room and I'll have to say eighteen rosaries, kneeling on the hard floor in front of the altar my father fixed up once, and——"

"Oh, Bess," Houdini said. "Don't cry!"

She felt his hand on her arm and, between sobs, heard his voice consoling, exhorting, trying to comfort her. When she looked up, she was amazed at the tenderness in his face. Then the tenderness changed, and a fierce look took its place.

"If you were my wife," he said, "nobody would dare to scold or punish you. Bess——"

She looked at him wonderingly, waiting.

All he said was, "come on," as he took her arm very firmly and began guiding her through the crowds. "Here."

Wiping her eyes, she saw that they were standing in a second-hand jewelry store.

"Try this one on," Houdini said and took one of the rings from a display rack.

"That's a very nice one," the man behind the counter said. "Just the thing."

Houdini stood holding the ring out to her. "Go ahead," he said softly, smiling at her. "Try it on. Bess, if you'd marry me——"

She looked at the ring and then at him. It was true: he was asking her to marry him. Not tomorrow, or the day after, or a year from now—but today! Here! In sweet confusion she thought, "I don't even know him. There's no such thing as love at first sight—or practically first sight. He doesn't really know me, either. I mustn't—I'll have to think—I can't marry a stranger just because I like him and because he's handsome and wonderful and kind and . . ."

She looked at him, remembering the first time they had seen each other and how, even then, in a crowded room, it was as if nobody else existed. Harry. Harry Houdini. He wasn't a stranger. He was someone she wanted to be with all the rest of her life.

She held out her hand and he slipped the ring on.

"Too large," he said and reached for another. Then another.

The last that he chose fit perfectly. "There," he said with a note of finality. "A perfect fit." He reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. Dismay touched his features and she saw that there were only a few coins left.

Beatrice groped in her own purse prayerfully, found the right amount of money and handed it to him.

"I'll pay you back," he said, and then laughed.

She laughed with him, but when they were outside

again, with the ring shining on her finger, the gravity of what they were about to do struck her again with new force.

Houdini, however, was worried about only one thing. Looking embarrassed, he said, "Now we've got the ring, but where do we go to get married?"

His turning to her for help was a new note. She found herself trying to come to the rescue. Remembering that her father had talked of a politician, John McKane, who could "do anything," she told Harry the man's name. "If he can do anything, he's the man for us," he said.

"After a brief search they found Mr. McKane in his office. "Of course, of course," McKane said after Beatrice had introduced herself and Houdini, "I remember your father speaking of you, Miss Rahner. What can I do for you?"

"We want to get married," Houdini said bluntly.

McKane stared at them. "Married! You two? Why, you're only kids. Go home where you belong and think it over. Marriage is a serious proposition."

"We are serious," Houdini said. "If you won't marry us then we'll—" He seemed at a loss, then declared, "We'll elope!"

McKane took a closer look at Houdini's belligerent face, and at Beatrice, and shook his head. "I think you're crazy. And I think you'll regret it. Marry in haste and repent at leisure." He looked at Beatrice. "Are you sure you know what you're doing? What about your mother?" —he turned to Houdini—"and your parents? Have they given their——?"

Houdini cut in, his voice filled with confidence, "My

mother would be happy with whatever makes me happy."

Beatrice avoided the question. "I'm eighteen," she said, her chin going up in defiance. "If you won't marry us, we'll run away and find someone else who will!"

McKane took another look at the determined faces of the two, then sighed. "All right. Where's your license?"

Houdini flushed. "I—we don't have one yet."

McKane said something under his breath, shaking his head again, then left, going toward another office in the building. He returned a few minutes later, muttering, "I feel like a criminal," but he had a license in his hand. Behind him came two other men, the type that Beatrice immediately identified as "ward heelers."

"Mike Donovan and Will Coates," McKane introduced the men. "They'll be the witnesses."

Beatrice's knees felt weak as she took her place beside Houdini and stood listening as McKane read the words of the marriage ceremony. Now, at the last minute, she was aghast at what she was doing—standing here in a littered office, reciting the marriage vows with a young stranger, while a political boss of Coney Island intoned, "I now pronounce you man and wife." And when Houdini, the magician who had left her breathless during his performance at the schoolhouse, fumbled the ring and dropped it before he could get it on her finger, she felt that perhaps she was as crazy as McKane had said.

For a moment they stood awkwardly silent, scarcely daring to look at each other.

"Aren't you going to kiss the bride?" McKane asked Houdini while the witnesses grinned.

Houdini relaxed and smiled. He pulled Beatrice to him and kissed her quickly, gently, then turned to

McKane again. He fumbled in his wallet, his expression turning grim.

"Here," Beatrice whispered, slipping him the last two dollars in her purse.

They told Mr. McKane good-by with as much dignity as they could muster, and quickly found themselves outside facing the brash colors and sounds of the amusement park again.

"Where are we going to go?" Beatrice found the voice to ask.

"Why," Houdini said as if there was only one place in the world to go, "I'm going to take you home to my mother."

They got on the trolley and Beatrice sat in a daze, trying to draw reassurance from the firm strength of Houdini's arm around her. It was a long ride from Coney Island to East 76th Street in Manhattan where Houdini lived. Listening to the clicking wheels, trying to picture her future mother-in-law, Mrs. Weiss, she felt her nervousness increase. As for her own mother—she scarcely dared to think. It was bad enough that she had married a public entertainer but—even more serious—Houdini had been brought up in the Jewish faith while her family were devout German Catholics.

"I said you'd make a beautiful bride," Houdini was whispering to her. "And you do." He leaned over and kissed her, indifferent to the other passengers.

Looking at him, seeing the love in his eyes, she forgot her fears. "My husband," she thought, marveling, and pride and love drove out all other thought.

Gaily, laughing, arm in arm, they left the trolley at last and walked toward the building where Houdini lived. Beatrice saw at once that the neighborhood was

as poor as her own. When they reached his tenement Houdini held the door open for her, led her down a hall, and stopped before another door. "I'll knock and surprise Ma," he said. Then he saw her frightened face. "Don't be afraid. Life's just beginning for us."

"—Or ending for me," Beatrice thought, her knees quaking as the door opened.

The woman who stood there was wearing an ordinary black dress and there was a streak of flour against her cheek, but she was as regal as a queen. Handsome, fine-featured, black-eyed, she looked questioningly at Beatrice and then at Houdini.

"My Mother dear," Houdini said formally in German, not knowing that Beatrice understood the language, "here is my wife Beatrice, whom I love very much."

Beatrice trembled as the black eyes were fixed on her, probing and searching. Again Mrs. Weiss looked at Houdini. "Do you love each other greatly?" she asked, speaking in German too.

"Yes we do, Mother," Houdini said.

Mrs. Weiss turned. She held her arms out to Beatrice, the black eyes soft and warm and accepting. "Then I haven't lost a son," she said as she embraced Beatrice. "I have gained a daughter. *Giebt's nicht, nur Mann und Frau.* Nothing matters but man and wife. Come in. There is little room in the house, but a great plenty in our hearts."

PINK TIGHTS

There was so little room in the Weiss flat that Beatrice had to sleep in the apartment of neighbors across the hall that first night. Although she was exhausted from the experiences of the day and from her first evening in the Weiss household, which was different in almost every way from her own, she lay awake for a long while. When, finally, she went to sleep it was with a whispered, "I love you," to the pillow, and a feeling of great loneliness.

She awoke with a start, aware that someone was in the tiny bedroom that had been assigned to her. Fearfully, she opened her eyes and made out the dim shape of a Chinese man dressed in a long silk robe. The man was tiptoeing about, peering here and there, with a lighted candle in his hand.

Beatrice's throat and mind contracted with terror. All that she had ever heard about the Chinese was connected with frightening tales of kidnaping and opium dens. She screamed, the sound tearing from her throat.

The man vanished. Doors all over the tenement and in the block crashed open.

Houdini came racing into the room, belting his trousers up around his night shirt. "Bess—what's the matter?" He sat beside her on the bed, holding her to him.

She told him what she had seen. Other people came crowding into the room: Mrs. Weiss, Theo, and the neighbor whose apartment this was.

"A man in a l-long robe," Beatrice stuttered against Houdini's chest. "A Chinese. Maybe it w-was an evil spirit, as punishment——"

Houdini laughed, wiping her tears away at the same time. "He *was* a Chinese, dear; a Chinese physician. He's Mrs. Moy's husband." He indicated the neighbor. "She left some things in this room and sent him in to get them. There are no evil spirits. And you scared Mr. Moy worse than he scared you."

He stayed with her a moment comforting her, while the rest went back to their beds. "I've got a job on my hands, I see, teaching you not to be afraid of evil spirits and all such superstitious nonsense." He held her face in his hands before his kissed her good night and stood up. "You look just like a little kid—not much older than my baby sister Gladys." At the door he said, "Tomorrow we'll go and see your mother and try to make peace. And we'll hunt for a furnished room to live in." He hesitated. "No, tomorrow's Friday, and I think it's the thirteenth. That's an unlucky day. We'll have to wait until Saturday."

Beatrice suddenly felt like giggling. So Houdini had his superstitions too!

Making peace with Mrs. Rahner was more difficult than Houdini knew. She closed the door firmly in their

faces and even refused to speak. The door was to remain closed for twelve years.

Finding a furnished apartment was not easy either. One look at ninety-pound Beatrice, tiny and thin in her frilly dress, made housekeepers' faces harden with suspicion. "A married couple!" they exclaimed, "Why, she's only a child." And they glared at Houdini as if he were a kidnaper.

Mrs. Weiss came to the rescue. "Here, Bess," she said after several days had gone by, "we'll fix you up." She held out one of her own black skirts and a black hat. The .skirt was one Mrs. Weiss had had from her younger days. "These won't make you look like an old woman, maybe, but they should help. I'll help you take the skirt in a bit so it will fit."

The dark clothes helped to make Bess look a little less childlike, although they were not very flattering. The result was that Houdini and Bess found a home at last.

In an attempt to make everybody happy—though Beatrice's sister Stella reported secretly that nothing would ever make their mother feel differently about the marriage—Houdini and Beatrice went through two more marriage ceremonies, one before a Jewish rabbi and another before a Roman Catholic priest.

"If we ever wanted to get divorced," Houdini said with a chuckle after the third ceremony, "I suppose we'll have to be divorced three times."

"How can you even think of such a thing?" Beatrice accused. "I'll never, never love anyone else as I love you"—and when he repeated the same words to her, she saw that it was true for both of them. Her mind admitted that it had been reckless and foolish for them to marry as swiftly as they had, and that ordinarily such a romance would come to quick disaster. But her heart

knew it had not been, and would not. Perhaps, she thought, returning to her belief in things like Fate and Luck and Chance, it had been a special kind of miracle.

Privately, Houdini thought it was a kind of miracle, too. As he and Theo neared the end of an engagement at a hall in Coney Island, Houdini was busily planning his and Beatrice's future. "The Houdini Brothers" would be a thing of the past once the Coney Island job was over. In the future it would be "The Houdinis, Harry and Bess."

Theo and he discussed the matter and Theo confessed that he had already started looking around for a job that had nothing to do with magic. "Maybe someday I'll go back to it again," Theo said. "But I'd just as soon have a steady job for a change. Anyhow, I knew when you married Bess that you'd want her for your partner."

"I'll pay you for all of the apparatus you bought with your own money, Dash. If you're not going to use it."

"All right. Have you talked to Bessie about the new act yet? Maybe she won't like the idea."

"Not like it?" Houdini exclaimed. "Why wouldn't she? Everybody knows that she and I will be appearing together from now on. Ma knows, and you—everybody." He added after a moment's thought, "Of course, I'll have to teach her a lot. She doesn't know anything about magic." He looked dreamily into space. "With Bess working with me, nothing can stop me from going to the top, Dash!"

Even though "everybody" knew that he and Bess would be performing in shows together, Houdini decided that perhaps he should discuss the matter with Bess.

"I'd better start showing you how to do some of my

magic tricks," he said one evening as they sat in their apartment.

"That would be fun," Bess said.

"And *work*. In order to be a professional, you'll need a lot of practice."

"Why should I worry about being a professional?"

He looked at her blankly. "I can't have an amateur acting with me, honey."

"With . . . you?" Bess's eyes widened. "You mean—oh, Harry, I couldn't go on the stage! I'd be scared to death. Not only that, but my family would be up in arms."

He felt stunned, and then drew her close to him. "Everybody's scared at first. You'll get over it. Just think how wonderful it will be, you and me together—you and I, I mean. We'll be famous together! The Houdinis, Harry and Bess. Doesn't that sound great? You work hard practicing with me, on simple things first, and I'll work even harder myself. I'm getting better with my escape stunts all the time. Bess, I'm going to do stunts nobody ever did before—just like Robert-Houdin. And I'm going to study other things, too, to try to make up for the schooling I didn't get." His voice blazed with enthusiasm. "I'm going to work and learn and try as I've never tried before."

"You already know so much," Bess said humbly.

"No," Houdini said, his face sobering. "I'll tell you something, if you won't laugh."

"I wouldn't ever laugh at you."

"Not long before I met you I was acting at a place and I told the audience, 'I ain't got nothing up my sleeve.' Afterwards, the manager said to me, 'You shouldn't say that.' I asked him, 'Why not?' " Houdini

smiled ruefully. "He told me to say, 'I have nothing up my sleeve.' In other words, my grammar was terrible. But that's only part of all I have to learn. I want to make something of myself. Something really great. With you helping me—" He got up. "I'll get some of my props and start teaching you what to do."

Bess sat still, her face dreamy. "The Houdinis—Bess and Harry," she said softly. "It sounds nice." She leaped up, her eyes and voice and hands eager. "Show me! I'll try as hard as anything!"

"You'll learn fast," Houdini assured her. He boasted, "With the Great Houdini as your teacher, how can you fail?"

From then on they practiced hour after hour together, Houdini encouraging, patiently consoling, constantly holding up the dream of their future fame before her. He took almost as much pride in her growing accomplishments as in his own.

However, one day, she said, "I don't see what's so hard about performing magic, aside from having to be clever with your hands. When I watched you that first time I actually thought you had superhuman powers. Now I know how you did everything."

Houdini felt a small jolt. So she thought she knew how he did everything, did she? He was silent, half amused and half chagrined. "By the way," he said lightly, "you've never told me your father's first name."

"It's—" Bess started to say.

"No, don't tell me. Write it on a piece of paper." He went to the desk where he kept his papers and books and tore a scrap of paper from a pad, found a pencil, handed them to her, then turned his back.

Covering the paper with her left hand, Bess printed the name Gebhardt. "I'm ready," she said.

Houdini turned. "Now crumple the paper in my hand and then burn it in the gas flame. When you've burned it, bring me the ashes."

Bess did as she was told. Smiling, she brought the black ashes and dumped them into his palm. "You're just showing off, Harry Houdini. You know you can't tell me the name."

Houdini pretended to fix her with his eyes at the same time that he rolled up his sleeve, baring his arm. He rubbed the ashes against the inner side of his arm and then thrust his arm out to her. "Look!"

Beatrice looked and grew pale. There, as if written in letters of blood, was the name GEBHARDT clearly visible on Houdini's skin.

"Oh-h-h!" she screamed and backed away, staring at Houdini as if he were the devil in human form. Reaching the door safely, she turned and began running.

Houdini's grin of triumph faded. He had actually scared her out of her wits! He raced after her, down the hall, down the stairs, and out on the street. "Bessie—wait! I didn't mean to scare you like that."

He caught up with her and stood holding her in his arms while windows shot up around them and heads poked out.

"Mother was right!" she gasped. "She said the devil could disguise himself as a handsome young man and lure girls to their doom. Let me go!"

"Bess—sweetheart—it was just a trick."

She shook her head, struggling against him.

"Please, Bessie, listen to reason. Come back home and I'll show you just how I did it. I wanted to impress you

but I never thought—please, Bess. I tell you it's just a trick."

Pleading, aching with remorse, he finally persuaded her to go back to the apartment. But it still took a good deal of talking and explaining to prove to her that he was really not a fiend in human disguise but merely a clever young magician who wanted to show off his skill to his wife.

When she said at last, "I'm sorry I said what I did about knowing just how you did everything, because now I know how truly wonderful you are," he felt satisfied. He had won his point. He smiled secretly to the darkness, stroking her soft hair.

A few days later, he came home with two surprises under his arm.

"Bess! We're in the newspapers already, even before we've started appearing in an act together!" He whipped out a copy of the small news sheet, *The Coney Island Clipper*, dated July 28, 1894. "Read it. Aloud."

Obediently, Beatrice read, "The brothers Houdini, who for years have mystified the world by their mysterious box mystery, known as 'Metamorphosis,' are no more and the team will hereafter be known as The Houdinis. The new partner is Miss Bessie Raymond—" Bess paused, crying indignantly, "They've got my name wrong!"

Houdini reflected her distress. "I know it. But read on."

"—Miss Bessie Raymond, the petite soubrette, who was married to Mr. Harry Houdini on July 22 by Rev. G. S. Loui, of Brooklyn. Harry has bought his brother's interest in the act, and he and Miss Bessie Raymond will

hereafter perform it." Bess looked at Houdini. "What's a soubrette?"

"I don't know," he confessed, and smiled. "But I guess it means somebody very wonderful. I'm going to have some handbills printed up right away, advertising our act."

"Where are we going to act first?"

"Well—I'll find somebody to hire us. When they see you, we won't have any trouble. Now—" He drew a package from under his arm, pride in his face. "Wait until you see this!"

His hands felt unsteady as he untied the package. He held up the contents. "Try these for size. I had them made special. Just for you."

Bess's mouth opened, then closed. Her eyes seemed to be starting from her head.

"What's the matter?" he asked, holding the pink tights close to him, searching for some hidden flaw.

"Tights!" Bess choked. "Harry—I couldn't get up in front of people with those on!"

He stared at her. The look on her face was one of pure horror. "But Bess——"

She ran and flung herself on the bed, weeping.

Houdini clapped his hand to his forehead, took a deep breath, and went after her.

A week later, the audience at one of the small dime museums in New York City watched an act advertised as "The Greatest Novelty Mystery Act in the World!" Up front a nineteen-year-old boy in a black suit, and an eighteen-year-old girl in a starched, low-necked blouse and brilliant pink tights, went through their per-

formance of changing places in a locked and tightly-roped trunk in an astonishing three seconds.

At the end of the act, the two joined hands and stood bowing and smiling, and then grinned broadly at each other as the applause sounded around them.

Bess and Harry Houdini had begun their long career together.

LOCKS AND BULLETS

Several months after Bess and Houdini were married, a small Wisconsin paper printed an advertisement signed "Harry Houdini, Handcuff King and Jail Breaker." The ad challenged anybody to handcuff Houdini so that he could not escape, and offered a hundred-dollar forfeit if the magician failed.

Houdini had saved the hundred dollars painfully from the small amounts of money he and Bess had made appearing in cheap theatres and museums, and he counted on the printed challenge to bring him the fame and fortune he was so certain would be his. However, the advertisement created scarcely a stir among the farmers of the area. It had its most dramatic effect far away in New York.

Bess had proudly clipped the advertisement and sent it home to her sister Stella, asking Stella to show it to their mother. Stella did, but instead of being impressed by her unknown son-in-law's cleverness, Mrs. Rahner was convinced that he must be a criminal, and promptly fainted.

The ad's failure to create any local excitement was only one among many discouragements as Houdini and

Bess spent week after week, month after month, filling minor engagements. Sometimes they were forced to work in beer halls where noisy patrons paid little attention to any performance, no matter how skillful the performers were. And Houdini was growing increasingly skillful.

It had become almost simple for him to open a handcuff with a quick, carefully aimed blow of his hand, or pick it with a common pin, or even with a piece of twine. His knowledge of locks was complete, and he had trained his muscles and hands and toes and teeth to deal with the most intricate bonds challengers could devise. Eighteen and nineteen hours a day he practiced, always perfecting his skill, seeking newer and more mystifying ways of displaying his ability. Wherever he went he hunted out other performers, jugglers or strong men or card manipulators, and watched each one until he had learned the secrets of their acts. He ate and slept magic. It was thanks only to Bess that his clothes were always cleaned and pressed, and it was she who forced him away from his practice long enough to eat. He knew in his heart that he was already a master of his profession. But he also knew that there was one vital thing which he still had not learned: how to make an audience thrill to his performances.

Usually the Houdinis had to put on ten or more shows a day and their normal earnings were only twenty dollars a week between them. To Houdini—eating in cheap restaurants, riding in dusty day coaches, sleeping in flea-infested and dirty hotels—the great dream of fame and fortune seemed even more remote than it had back in the wood shed in Appleton. What was worse, Bess was forced to share the grueling life with

him—she whom he wanted to shower with gifts and beauty.

Bess, however, never complained. Or, if she did, it was a complaint against the blindness of agents and audiences who could not appreciate Houdini's greatness. Sometimes she tried to take the blame on herself. "It's me," she grieved. "If only I were older and fatter I'd be a better partner." With her slim-hipped, boyish figure, she felt that she could not compete with the buxom performers who were so popular.

"I love you the way you are," Houdini invariably replied.

There was one bright spot in their first winter together. While they were employed at a dim concert hall in the South, a telegram arrived from an agent who said he had booked them to play at Tony Pastor's in New York.

Houdini and Bess rushed breathlessly to New York on borrowed money. Pastor's was one of the great show places of the nineties, a place where the outstanding performers appeared.

Their first disappointment came when they discovered that they were billed to appear at hours when the smallest number of people would be in the theatre. Having looked forward to thunderous applause from a great audience, they found themselves doing their show for a handful of persons, including scrubwomen who had just finished their chores around the theatre. A pianist played for them instead of the full orchestra they had envisioned. The excited reporters and critics they had expected to have clustering around them did not appear. At the end of their week's engagement they had Tony Pastor's personally written statement that

their act was "satisfactory and interesting," but that was all.

Grimly, Houdini and Bess hunted for other jobs in the same drab museums or concert halls they had thought they had left forever. When, in the spring of 1895, an offer came to tour with the Welsh Brothers' Circus through the smaller eastern towns, Houdini leaped at the chance.

They joined the circus at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, arriving in a soaking rain. Wading through mud, holding his hat against a fierce wind, Houdini led the way across soggy fields, searching for the circus tents. He remembered Nat's teasing remark, years before, about Barnum and Bailey's circus not being big enough for him. The Welsh Brothers' Circus was only a small show without wild animals. His heart ached as he looked back and saw Bess stumbling along through the downpour, with their newly acquired fox terrier puppy in her arms. Even the dog looked miserable.

After tramping for miles through the darkness, they heard a voice call out from a shadowy structure, "Are you the Houdinis?"

"Yes!" Houdini shouted back.

He and Bess were hustled inside the structure and they saw that it was an old truck which had been made over into living quarters. A lantern flashed and they found themselves facing a huge man with walrus mustaches.

"I'm Welsh, your boss," the man said, eyeing Houdini and Bess. "Now that you're here, what can you do?"

"I can do anything," Houdini boasted.

"Good. The first thing you do is to work in the side show. Houdini, you'll do the Punch and Judy show."

Houdini winced.

"Mrs. Houdini, I want you to do mind reading. The two of you can do your magic stuff together—the trunk trick and the handcuff act. The handcuff act will be the big feature."

Houdini brightened and smiled at Bess.

"And you're both to be in the parade," Welsh went on. "Twenty-five dollars a week and your keep." He showed them to their quarters in the truck, a tiny room divided from other rooms by a cardboard partition.

Bess struggled to hide her dismay as she sat down on the narrow cot that was to be their bed. Tears fell on the puppy's back and she tried to wipe them away before Houdini could see.

Houdini, all his confidence returned, sat down beside her, patting her and the puppy alternately. "When morning's here and the sun's shining, everything will look different, Bess."

The sun was shining in the morning, but Bess was not especially cheered by breakfast with the rest of the troupe in a wet tent, where two long, bare pine tables stood with rough planks on wooden horses for seats. Houdini, however, took it all in his stride. He was familiar with circus life and he felt that he was prepared for whatever might come.

His boast that he could do "anything" was soon put to the test. Although the show carried no wild animals, one of the banners advertised a fierce and savage "Wild Man." So far none of the customers in the small towns where the circus stopped had ever complained that the advertised Wild Man never appeared. The time came,

however, when a young farmer in the audience began shouting, "Where's the Wild Man?" Others joined in the cry.

Backstage, the troupe members looked at one another helplessly. The cries of the crowd were becoming threatening.

Houdini stepped forward. "Hurry up," he told his fellow performers. "Get a cage—and some kind of costume—and tell the ringmaster to stall a little." As he spoke he began to rumple his thick, bushy dark hair. "I'll be the Wild Man."

Bess found some old sacks and stitched them together for Houdini's costume. A wooden cage was found and brought in. A Mrs. McCarthy, the gun-juggler, rushed forward to smear make-up on Houdini's face.

Out in the ring, ringmaster Clinton Newton launched into an account of the Wild Man's capture in the deep jungles of Java. "There he terrorized the natives for miles around," Newton told the audience, "rampaging through the villages, snarling and attacking any living thing. Dangerous, completely untamed, he lives on a diet of raw meat, cigarettes and cigars."

Houdini, waiting behind the tent flap, swallowed. He had never smoked tobacco, let alone eaten it!

"And now—the fierce, ravenous Wild Man!" the ringmaster concluded, waving his hand.

The wooden cage was hauled in. There, crouching inside, growling, and tearing at a piece of raw meat, his hair matted, his sack clothes hanging on him, was Harry Houdini, the self-proclaimed *artiste* and mighty magician.

The audience was wild with delight. Women

screamed merrily. Men threw a barrage of cigarettes and cigars into the cage. Children shivered in happy horror.

Houdini observed it all with divided emotions—gratification that he was a success, and a gnawing dismay that he was being cheered for a foolish, fake masquerade.

The Wild Man act was made a permanent feature of the show and it was as popular with the troupe as with the audiences because of the free cigarettes and cigars that Houdini passed out to his friends at the end of the act.

In the meantime Houdini continued to demonstrate his handcuff act. Each week he deliberately undertook more difficult escapes from irons of all kinds, but the audience response was polite and cool. It seemed that his long study of locks and his hours of practice in opening them had been a waste of time.

Then one day in Providence, Rhode Island, the whole circus troupe was arrested. The circus had been performing on a Sunday, violating a state law. Mr. Welsh was absent on a trip to New York and there was no one in a position to defend the group; so, after a brief hearing, all the performers were locked in the town jail.

From their cell, Houdini and Bess heard the moans and groans of the others—the high wails of the Fat Lady who cried that her small quarters were squeezing her to death, the fretful sobs of an acrobat's baby.

"Can't you do something, Harry?" Bess appealed. She herself had a cold and was slightly feverish.

"Do you think I should?"

"I certainly do! They have no right to lock us up in here without a trial. It'll kill the Fat Lady, and one of the clowns is sick. Please. Can't you try?"

Houdini got up. He went to the cell door, worked a moment, and swung the door open. Then, followed by Bess, he walked to each of the neighboring cells in turn and opened them all.

"Oh, Houdini! You *are* great!" the Fat Lady cried, throwing her arms around his neck, choking him with gratitude.

"Sh-h-h," Houdini said, wriggling free, and grinning. "You'll have the sheriff back if he hears us."

Tiptoeing, jubilant, the whole company crept from the jail and back to the tent. The next morning Mr. Welsh returned, arranged matters to the astonished sheriff's satisfaction, and the circus left town.

"You're a hero," Bess told Houdini as they traveled onward.

"—To the circus!" he said pointedly.

By the time the season was over, he and Bess had managed to save half their salary; the other half went to Houdini's mother.

"I'm going to invest in my own show," Houdini announced. "That's the only way to get anywhere."

It was a good way to go in debt, he discovered before long, especially as the show in which he invested was already shaky financially. By the time the experiment ended in failure, Houdini and Bess knew once more what it was like to worry about having enough to eat. But still Houdini's confidence in himself remained unshaken.

Their next job was with a show traveling to Nova Scotia, and Houdini thought up a daring act that he was certain would bring him attention. He planned to free himself while tied to a running horse, but the stunt became more daring than he had anticipated. The livery

man who provided the horse picked a young, high-spirited animal that had scarcely been ridden before. Houdini found himself being whisked down a highway and across fields so swiftly that there was every chance he would fall and be trampled to death the moment he freed himself from his bonds. Jolting helplessly along on the horse's back, he decided that his only hope was to let the horse run until it was exhausted. So, each time the horse slowed down, Houdini beat at it with his heels and elbows until the creature picked up speed again. Finally, sweat-lathered and worn out, the horse stopped, and Houdini slipped from his bonds and dismounted—several miles from any audience.

While touring Nova Scotia, Houdini visited an asylum for the insane at the town of St. John. Restraints were put on violent patients to confine their hands and arms. The restraint was a heavy canvas jacket with long sleeves, and leather cuffs which could be fastened securely behind the patient's back. With his arms strapped across his chest and his hands fastened within the long sleeves, a man in a "strait jacket" was almost always powerless to escape from it.

Houdini watched such a patient struggling in a strait jacket. He experienced pity, horror—and inspiration. If it were possible to get enough slack, by dislocating a shoulder, as he could do, perhaps a strait jacket escape on the stage would make an audience sit up and take notice. He borrowed a strait jacket from the asylum superintendent, took it back to his quarters, and began practicing. That very night he added the act to the show, asking volunteers to strap him into the jacket.

It took all of his ingenuity and strength to free himself but when he appeared in front of the curtain, di-

sheveled and exhausted, his muscles aching, there was only a small flutter of applause. The audience was convinced that the whole thing was a fake.

When the show dissolved, Houdini and Bess boarded a ship headed for Boston and offered to do a show in return for their passage. When the time came for Houdini to appear in the lounge to do his part of the act, his face was a pale, sickly green and his hands were trembling. In a thin voice he began to make his speech to the audience. Suddenly he swayed, almost falling to the floor, and blood trickled from his nose.

While Bess wrung her hands, the ship's doctor assured her, "It's seasickness. He'll be all right once he's on land again."

He was, but there was no improvement in his and Bess's financial condition. Again they found themselves touring the country, appearing in small halls and museums. And though Houdini kept saying stubbornly, "Soon we'll get a real break," and Bess echoed his confidence, matters went from bad to worse. Once, impelled by hunger, they were driven to snatching some potatoes from a grocery store. They picked up some broken boxes for fuel and ran like nervous, guilty children to cook the potatoes on a decrepit stove in their small, airless apartment. There, sitting on the floor, they devoured the boiled potatoes, laughing. When they could not find enough scrap wood to keep them warm, they managed to steal into various theatres where they sat soaking up the heat.

One day during this period Houdini brought home a particularly good packing box for fuel, but it was in such good condition that he hated to break it up for fire wood. Sitting there, looking at it, he said to Bess,

"I've an idea for a packing box escape someday, Bess; one where I won't have to use a trick box. If I can work it out, that will help to make me famous."

"If *this* packing box will help to make us warm now, I'll be satisfied," Bess answered with a smile. Secretly, she marveled at the man she had married. There he sat, shivering, with scarcely a penny in his pocket, and he was completely absorbed in working out a new act, with his manner as confident as ever.

Houdini's faith in himself seemed impervious to the hardest blows. He was so certain that the name of Houdini would someday be famous that he refused to use it for acts that were not of sufficiently high caliber. When he and Bess were reduced to appearing in cheap comedy roles or in crude melodramas, he assumed a different name and appeared onstage with wads of paper stuffed in his cheeks so that nobody would recognize him. On one such occasion, in a comedy skit calling for him to throw a bottle at Bess, blood spurted over her face as the bottle landed. Houdini cried out in horror and ran to her. Bess revealed that she had added a new touch to the act by concealing a rubber bag filled with ketchup under her hair and had broken it at the appropriate moment. Houdini was too terrified to be able to laugh—especially as he had swallowed the paper wadding in his cheeks.

Appearing with Bess in another comedy show, billed as "The Rahners, Harry and Bess," Houdini decided to try to get the manager to let them appear in their real role as magicians.

"I think you should know," he told the manager," that my name isn't really Rahner. I'm the Great Houdini."

The manager looked at him blankly. "The Great Houdini—who in thunder is he?"

Undisturbed, Houdini explained. As a result, the manager agreed to let them put on their magic act. First, though, Houdini had to get their magic apparatus out of hock.

The triumph was short-lived. Again, the show closed. The Houdinis drifted from place to place. At a low ebb —so low that even Houdini's optimism wavered—he actually went to four leading New York newspapers and offered to sell all of his magical secrets for twenty dollars. Nobody was interested. Desperate, he opened a school of magic. Then he undertook to sell magical equipment for a Chicago firm, a job which helped to eke out his earnings for many years.

In the fall of 1897, the Houdinis were engaged by a traveling medicine show called The California Concert Company. The company was playing in Garnett, Kansas, and Houdini and Bess took a train to reach the town. En route they had to change trains at three o'clock in the morning. When they reached the junction spot, the train for Garnett was ready to leave and there was no one on hand to shift their trunks of show equipment from one train to the other.

Houdini begged some of the other passengers to help him carry the baggage, but only two of the four trunks were on the express train when the conductor said impatiently, "We can't wait any longer. You'll have to go on without the rest of your stuff, mister."

Desperately, Houdini explained, "I can't. I have to do a show this very day and if I don't have the trunks I can't present my act."

"I can't help that," the conductor said. "My job's to run this train on time." He pushed Houdini and Bess aside, signaled to the engineer to start, and swung aboard.

Smoke puffed from the locomotive's funnel. Slowly, the wheels began to turn.

Houdini began running, stretching his legs out as he had never stretched them even in his days of winning medals for racing. Cinders flew up from his heels as he sprinted toward the locomotive and past it. Bess, running behind him, cried out in panic as she realized what he meant to do.

Panting, Houdini dashed ahead of the moving locomotive. When he was a short distance from it he flung himself across the tracks, face down.

The train's brakes screamed. The locomotive jarred to a stop. Trainmen leaped down and ran to the spot where Houdini lay gripping the rails with his hands and feet.

"Get off the tracks, you maniac!" they yelled.

"If you move that train another foot," Houdini gasped, "without my trunks aboard, you'll have to move it right over me!"

Two of the trainmen tried to tear him loose but Houdini locked his fingers around the rails and stiffened his body, his perfectly trained muscles as hard as the steel to which he clung.

A moment later the conductor appeared, exasperation and defeat on his face. "Get up!" he ordered. "Your trunks are aboard."

Fingernails broken, his palms and ankles bruised and bleeding, his clothes damaged, Houdini got up, strode past the trainmen, and got on the train with Bess.

It was in Kansas, too, that Houdini came close to having his career ended in quite a different way. After a show at Coffeeville, two gamblers accosted him.

"Since you're so smart at opening locks," one of the

men said, "come along with us and open the door at the gambling hall. My partner and me want to sneak in and fix up the cards and dice so we'll be sure to make a cleaning with them tomorrow."

"Pick your own locks!" Houdini said, and went on to his hotel.

He was just going to bed when a telegram from New York arrived, requiring an immediate answer. He pulled on his clothes, went to the railroad station to send his wire, and was walking back through the black, rainy night when something cold and metallic was pressed against his temple.

"You'd better change your mind about picking that lock for us, Mister Magician," a voice said. "Get moving."

With one gambler's gun in his back and the other gambler alongside, Houdini moved. They reached the rear door of the gambling house. While one gambler held a light, Houdini inspected the door lock and opened it. A short entrance led to another locked door which was in the cellar. The cellar door was built to open outward, Houdini saw, as he worked the lock. Tensing, he eased the door open, then gave it a violent swing. It crashed into the gambler holding the gun, pushing him off balance so that he fell against the other gambler. Both fell.

Houdini leaped into the cellar, yanking the door shut behind him, and snapped the lock from the inside. He stood waiting, adjusting his eyes to the cellar darkness, hoping to find another exit. A window grating shone dimly at one side of the cellar and he moved cautiously toward it.

A gray figure appeared at the grating. A gun glinted.

Instinctively, Houdini flung his hand in front of his face. Gunfire flashed. Pain stung Houdini's hand and he felt blood run down his wrist. There were footsteps outside, and then silence.

Wrapping his hand in his handkerchief, Houdini waited until he dared to move again. Then, groping about in the cellar, he found an exit, worked the lock, and stole out. Whether the gamblers had fled, or were still waiting for him at the regular exit, he did not know. But when he reached the hotel he found the bullet from their gun imbedded at the base of two fingers—a bullet he was to carry with him for the rest of his life, for he never bothered to have it removed.

With a grim smile, he said to Bess, "Show business is getting dangerous."

"If it weren't, you'd manage to make it dangerous," she answered. "I'm surprised you didn't try to catch that bullet in your teeth like Robert-Houdin."

"I suppose you think I couldn't!" he said.

Hastily, Bess said, "You don't have to prove it. I know you could."

JAIL BREAKS

In the fall of 1898, Houdini and Bess walked into the city jail in Chicago and made their way to the desk of Andy Rohan, lieutenant of the detective force and the chief of police's right-hand man.

Rohan, a heavy man with drooping red mustaches, looked up and recognized the dark-haired young man he had been introduced to by reporters some time before.

"I'd like you to meet my wife," Houdini said. "I told her you were interested in some of our adventures on the road and she's a better storyteller than I am."

Vaguely surprised, Rohan acknowledged the introduction, murmured something about being busy, and then found Bess leaning on his desk and beginning a long tale about a time when Houdini had been unable to get out of a pair of handcuffs a challenger had placed on him. "It's the only time he ever failed," Bess said. "And that was because a slug had been placed in the lock. Nobody could have opened the lock, even with a hammer and chisel. Houdini actually wept . . ."

While she talked, Houdini strolled off, trying to look like a casual visitor merely glancing around the jail.

Actually, he was making a quick study of the complicated lock system. A swift glance here, another there, a moment's close inspection of this lock and that, and he knew what he wanted to know. He had gone to great pains to arrange this secret inspection, the prelude to an exploit which he counted on to make all of Chicago gasp. Challenges to local sheriffs and police in the various towns they were passing through had been bringing gratifying results in the way of publicity. But, so far, the publicity had been confined to smaller cities. Now, if Bess could just keep the detective distracted long enough . . .

". . . And another time," Bess was telling Rohan, "we were doing mind-reading acts together and pretending that we were in communication with departed spirits. Only, Houdini couldn't stand it. People really believed he had mystic powers, and finally he said he'd rather starve than take advantage of people's faith. So then ——"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Houdini," Rohan interrupted, "but I'm a busy man. This jail was built for people who have official business here. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave now." Even as he looked up, Houdini was standing back beside Bess.

"Of course," Houdini said. "We don't want to interfere with your work. But perhaps we'll see you again."

"Well—" Rohan said with some lack of enthusiasm.

Outside, Houdini tucked Bess's arm in his. "We're all set. Now for my date with the reporters tomorrow. You did a good job with Rohan—only, did you have to roll your eyes at him like that?"

"Why not? He's a nice man."

"He's going to be a surprised one tomorrow."

The next day Houdini gathered a number of reporters around him and announced, "If you fellows want a good news story, come down to the city jail with me. I'll let the boys down there handcuff me and lock me in a cell and then I'll get out faster than you can say 'Chicago.' "

The reporters agreed that it would be a good story if Houdini could do it. Nobody had tried the feat before. So they got a photographer and set out.

Rohan grumbled a little about the whole idea's being so much foolishness, but actually he was pleased at the presence of the reporters. Free publicity didn't hurt the jail, either, so he finally said, "Go ahead, Houdini. We'll lock you up, all right. If you want to make a fool of yourself, that's no skin off my nose." Therewith, he ordered two of the guards to handcuff Houdini carefully and put him in one of the stoutest cells.

Rohan and the reporters had scarcely time to sit down in Rohan's office, prepared to wait indefinitely, before Houdini walked in and joined them.

Houdini's broad grin faded as the reporters shrugged. "You're not fooling anybody," one of them said. "Rohan says you were around here just yesterday, and a couple of times before. You've had plenty of time, apparently, to make wax impressions of the locks in the cells and corridor exits and have some keys manufactured. Who couldn't open a lock when he's got keys right in his pockets?"

Rohan sat smiling, hands folded over his huge belly. "Maybe your stunts make big news in the sticks, Houdini, but not in Chicago."

"All right," Houdini said coolly, "why don't you strip me of my clothes and then lock me up?"

Rohan looked at him sharply. The reporters pricked

up their ears. "That sounds fair enough," Rohan agreed. "Go ahead, boys, strip him down to the skin."

They did. And when one suggested that Houdini might be concealing a key in his mouth, Houdini told them to tape his mouth shut. This was done and Houdini was led naked and manacled to a cell. His clothes were locked in another cell.

Back in the warden's office, the group sat down to wait once more. They were there less than ten minutes when Houdini strolled in, smiling and completely dressed, entering through the door that opened onto the street. He was a little breathless and, when questioned, confessed that the escape had taken him longer than it would have otherwise because he had taken time to run to his lodgings nearby and yell of his success to his wife.

The reporters, the photographer, Andy Rohan, and the small crowd that was gathering quickly, were stunned.

"It's—impossible," Rohan muttered.

The reporters rushed to their newspaper offices. The photographer snapped a picture and rushed after them.

In the morning, Houdini hurried to the newsstand. There it was—his picture and a single column several inches long telling about his feat. He bought every copy of the newspaper on the stand and ran back to show Bess.

"Look, Bess!" he yelled, almost breaking the apartment door down as he entered the room. "My picture's in the paper! I'm famous now!"

That night they celebrated with an extra-good dinner, and with a special bone for their pet terrier.

After a few days of waiting for the publicity to pro-

duce something more than clippings for their scrapbook, a representative from the Hopkins Theatre called on the Houdinis and offered them a job. It was the first time in their four years together, outside of the engagement at Tony Pastor's, that they had had a chance at a first-class house. Although Bess had the flu, she got out of bed and rode with Houdini in a cab to the theatre. She was twenty-two years old and it was the first cab ride she had ever had.

The engagement at the Hopkins Theatre was a moderate success, but when it was over Houdini and Bess found themselves playing in dime museums again. Then one night at a museum in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a stranger approached Houdini and suggested that he and Bess have a cup of coffee with him in a nearby restaurant.

Without introducing himself, the man proceeded to criticize Houdini's act. "Your trunk trick and handcuff escape are fine acts—nobody can beat you with those—but you don't use the right showmanship. You've got your act all cluttered up with pigeons and guinea pigs popping out of nowhere, and a lot of hocus-pocus that only draws attention away from the big thrillers. If you'll cut out the minor magic I can use you on my circuit at sixty dollars. Maybe more, if you earn it."

"We'd like the chance," Houdini said meekly. "But—what's your name?"

"Martin Beck," the man said. "Of the Orpheum Circuit."

Houdini and Bess squeezed hands under the table. At last they were going to be in big-time vaudeville! Their dime museum and side show days were behind them.

Back at their lodgings, they sadly said good-by to the pigeons and guinea pigs. From now on, as Beck had advised, Houdini would concentrate on the "big thrillers."

Before they started for California where they were to appear first on the Orpheum Circuit, Bess said, "Harry, I think we should change the name of our act. I've never heard of a really successful husband and wife team on the stage, where both are featured in an act like ours. You should advertise just yourself, Harry Houdini."

"What would I do without you?" he challenged.

She pinched his ear playfully. "You're not going to be without me, ever."

The job with the Orpheum Circuit marked the real beginning of Houdini's fame as an escape artist. In one of the large West Coast cities a chief of police locked Houdini in a jail cell with four sets of handcuffs on his arms, shackles on his legs, and one leg imprisoned in an Oregon boot. The iron boot weighed fifty-five pounds and had no key, working by a combination lock. Houdini escaped with apparent ease. Astonished by this, the police chief issued a statement warning that Houdini could be one of the most dangerous criminals in the United States if he wished, and that law officers should remember what he looked like in case they ever needed to apprehend him.

It was not a flattering statement, but it proved that people were beginning to take Houdini seriously as a master of his trade.

In San Francisco, Houdini again astounded police and public. His feats at the Orpheum Theatre earned

him a feature story in the *San Francisco Examiner,* June 18, 1899, with six photographs showing him extricating himself from ropes with which he had been tied to a chair.

Said the article, "Anybody who goes to the Orpheum may have a trial at lashing him to a chair with as long a rope as may be obtainable and with as many turns and twists and knots as may be devised." The article went on to quote Houdini as saying, "My offer of fifty dollars for a pair of regulation handcuffs which I cannot escape from is still open to doubting Thomases."

There were scarcely any doubting Thomases left in the city when Houdini challenged the police. The police put ten pairs of handcuffs on his arms, and then the arm-bands were handcuffed to the fetters. Houdini was so weighed down with irons and locks he could scarcely hobble into a room which had been set aside for him—a room which he had not been permitted to enter before. Even as a sergeant of detectives told reporters that it was absolutely impossible for a man so shackled to get free, Houdini walked up to the sergeant carrying all the irons in his hands.

A strait jacket was tried next, but it held Houdini no better than the iron shackles had.

Houdini's years of physical training were beginning to bring their rewards. Although he was very strong, it was not strength alone that helped him escape from restraints, but technique and ability besides. His first task, when in a strait jacket, was to try to raise his strapped, canvas-sheathed arms up in front of his body. He did this by placing one elbow on some solid foundation and, by sheer strength, forcing his arm gradually upward until he could push his head under his elbow.

He then managed to undo the buckles of the straps of the cuffs with his teeth. Once his arms were free, he undid the buckles at the back of the strait jacket, even though his fingers had to work through the canvas sleeves still encasing his hands. With the back buckles open, it was comparatively simple to free himself of the jacket.

Houdini's mastery of all kinds of locks came partly from a thorough knowledge of how they operated and from his having hidden tools which he used in opening them. He made some of his picklocks from piano wire. Such a picklock was easily concealed on his body, whether in his mouth or nostrils, or glued to the sole of his foot.

According to a writer in *Variety* magazine, he was able to swallow steel bars and files of considerable size and regurgitate them when necessary. Also, he was said to be able to make his wrists and ankles bigger when shackles were applied. Most often he relied on his knowledge of lock mechanisms to free himself from handcuffs or leg irons. Some handcuffs could be made to spring open by striking the part near the hinge and keyhole on the heel of a shoe or against the floor. For some time Houdini had a plate of lead fastened inside the knee of his trousers where it would not be noticeable, and struck the handcuff against that.

Committees that tied him with rope usually used new rope, to be certain that it would not break. This was an advantage to Houdini, as knots in new rope can be untied more easily than in old, soft rope. Such challenging committees usually used a long, continuous piece of rope, which also was to Houdini's advantage, for he found it easier to get a slack in a long rope. If,

when the rope was being pulled around him, the committee seemed to be doing too good a job, he would swell his muscles, slightly hunch his shoulders, and hold his arms a little away from his sides to try to insure some slack. And sometimes he had a sharp knife with a hook-shaped blade concealed in his clothing somewhere, in case a knot proved too troublesome.

Concealed picklocks or keys or knives are all part of an escape artist's trade. Houdini used such props as all other magicians did and do. It was his skill in their use, together with his daring and muscular control, that made him great.

His greatness was recognized wherever he went in the days following his first successes with the Orpheum Circuit, from San Francisco to Los Angeles, Memphis to Nashville, Kansas City to Providence. Police in numerous cities began to compete with each other for the chance to test his skill.

All the while, Houdini kept studying more difficult methods of escape. His beginning fame was only a spur to his ambition. Wherever he went, he continued to seek other performers and try to ferret out their secrets. At last he was learning to dramatize his ability so that he was becoming a real showman, but his deepest desire was to attain the highest perfection of his art of which he was capable. He spent his energies and his money extravagantly, laboring hour after hour to develop or master new feats, spending what was left from his earnings (after deducting the regular, weekly amount for his mother) on old books and curios and anything and everything having to do with magic. Although he was now a success, he was still not earning what his tremendous skill deserved.

Nor was he getting any attention from the eastern cities, where the reputations of performers were generally made. When the Orpheum tour ended in the fall of 1899, there was still no job for him in the large cities of the East. Agents and managers were unimpressed by the twenty-five year old veteran of show business, and Houdini found himself facing the prospect of small-time halls and museums again.

"What can I do, Bess?" he repeated over and over, pacing the floor of an apartment they had rented in New York at the end of the successful tour. "What can I do to make them accept me here in the East? If I were some European magician from Paris or Berlin they'd come running to sign me up. But just because I'm an ordinary American—" He paused, snapping his fingers. "That's it, Bess! We'll go to Europe. We'll win our reputation there and then we'll come back and let them beg us to appear on their stages here! That's the answer!"

It was a big gamble, but Bess agreed that it was worth trying.

Before they ordered their tickets, Houdini went out and bought a woman's blouse. He pinned a five-dollar bill to the front, wrapped the blouse, and mailed it to Mrs. Flitcroft of Delevan, Wisconsin, the farm woman who had fed him and given him a bed for the night thirteen long years before.

On a spring day in 1900 a small, second-class liner carrying Bess and Harry Houdini steamed out into New York harbor. The small ship shook with every reverberation of its engines and rocked about even in the mild swell of the bay. Houdini, standing at the ship's rail,

watching the skyline of New York recede, felt his eyes glaze. A beginning nausea rose in his stomach.

When the ship reached the ocean the swells began to rock it in earnest. Green in the face, Houdini went staggering toward his cabin and flung himself on the berth.

The cabin was hot and stuffy. For the next two days Bess sat fanning Houdini, putting cold cloths on his head, forcing him to sip lemon juice, constantly trying to assuage his seasickness. On the third day Houdini became delirious.

The ship's doctor shook his head and said, "You'll have to tie him to his berth. He might do something rash in his delirium."

Bess felt an hysterical desire to laugh. Tie Houdini down so he couldn't escape from his berth! Soberly, she managed to answer, "Yes, I'll try."

Mostly, she relied on verbal persuasion, sitting by, holding his hand, restraining him when he reared up on his elbow crying out in a nightmare. But she could not stay by his side every minute. When she went to have her meals in the dining room she took the bed sheets and bound Houdini to the berth, making certain that the knots were tied underneath the bed where he could not get at them.

The worst point of the voyage was reached when Houdini muttered deliriously that he was going to throw himself into the sea. "I'll get out!" he proclaimed, wild-eyed. "Packing case—chains—I'll get out, even under the sea. Just let me jump in. Let me get up!"

"Harry, darling," Bess pleaded, "you're sick. You must try to lie still. Just lie still."

Her nerves frayed, almost sick from exhaustion her-

self, she got a life preserver from the steward and strapped it on Houdini just in case he should throw himself over the rail when she was not near to prevent him.

Once, when he was free of his delirium, but still miserably ill, she said, "Oh, Harry, I wonder if it's worth it." Anxiety drilled through her. What if this were a fool's chase? What if London and Paris and Berlin should be as cold to them as New York had been? She trembled at the thought of being in a foreign land without money, without friends.

Houdini managed a wan smile. "Why wouldn't it be worth it, Bess? When we come back we'll have the world at our feet." His eyes burned with conviction. "You surely don't doubt it, do you?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "No."

QUEEN FOR A DAY

London with its gray towers and bridges was as indifferent to Houdini and Bess as New York had been. As he walked the unfamiliar streets—Drury Lane, Charing Cross Road, the Strand—seeing one theatrical agent after another, Houdini's optimism flagged. But he kept going. He could not give up.

His spirits were at a low ebb the day that he met a young theatrical agent named Harry Day, but Day was impressed by Houdini and arranged an interview for him with C. Dunas Slater, manager of the fine Alhambra Theatre.

Houdini went through some of his tricks for Slater, and then looked hopefully at him. "So you claim you can escape from any kind of irons, do you?" Slater asked skeptically.

"Yes, sir." Houdini pushed his press clippings in front of the manager again, pointing out the news stories of his escapes from handcuffs and jail cells in the States. "I'll let anybody challenge me."

"Including Scotland Yard?"

Houdini's expression of confidence did not change at the mention of that famous police organization. "Yes."

"Of course, the Yard men may not be as co-operative as the sheriffs back in your country," Slater said slyly.

"Co-operative?"

"I've heard of men bribing police and wardens."

Houdini flushed. "You've never heard it about me, and never will. How soon can we go to Scotland Yard?"

"Right now," Slater answered and reached for the phone. He made the arrangements and the group set out.

Houdini and Bess held hands in the carriage as it rattled over the cobblestones toward Scotland Yard's headquarters on the Thames. Harry Day looked nervous, obviously afraid that he had gone too far in recommending the cocky young American beside him.

At the Yard's headquarters, Superintendent Melville laughed openly at the idea of anyone's escaping from Yard handcuffs. "However," he said, "if Mr. Slater wants to have a bit of sport at your expense, young man, I'll oblige him." He pulled open a drawer and took out a pair of shiny new bracelets connected by heavy links. "This is the kind of jewelry we put on young Yankees who get into trouble over here. And you'll be in trouble once I fasten these on you." He led Houdini to a large, upright beam that was a building support. "Put your arms around this pillar, lad."

Houdini did as he was told and the superintendent locked the cuffs to Houdini's wrists.

Superintendent Melville turned, smiling, to Slater and the others. "We may as well go and sit down for a couple of hours. When he's had his fill I'll go back and set him free."

Bess gave Houdini an anxious glance as she followed the men away from the pillar.

"Just a minute!" Houdini called out. "I'll go with you."

Melville turned.

"This is the way Yankees got out of handcuffs," Houdini said. The cuffs clattered to the floor and he stepped away from the pillar.

Melville's smile faded. Slater's eyes popped. Harry Day rubbed his hands together as if he saw a clear and dazzling road leading into his own future.

"You're hired," Slater said. "Come back to my office and I'll sign you up for two weeks."

On the way back to the office, Day whispered, "When that's over, I'll get you another engagement, Houdini. I'd be happy to be your agent from now on."

"Fine," Houdini said, and turned his attention to Bess, who was smiling up at him radiantly.

Back at the office, Slater got busy at once ordering press releases and handbills advertising Houdini's forthcoming appearance at his theatre. "I'll leave the word 'marvel' out of the publicity," he told the Houdinis. "London's had so many fake marvels that the public won't swallow any more. And just to make sure, and to get the reporters on our side, I'm going to arrange a special showing for you before the press. Some of the reporters have played a big part in exposing frauds."

Although Slater didn't say so in so many words, Houdini realized that the manager still suspected trickery.

When Houdini gave his special performance before members of the press who had come prepared to "expose" him, even to bringing along an ancient slave iron from which they were certain he could not escape —but from which he did escape in less than three minutes—he won Slater's confidence entirely. The re-

porters admitted frankly that they did not know how he performed his feats but that they were satisfied there was no fakery about it.

Jubilant, Bess said when they were alone, "You've won them all over now, Harry!"

"No, I still have to win the English public. My big performance is still ahead."

Looking at him, Bess realized that Houdini was truly nervous, more so than she had ever known him to be before.

On the night of the opening performance Houdini paced back and forth in the wings of the Alhambra, waiting for his cue to walk onto the stage. Bess paced with him, dressed in the page boy costume she wore as his assistant. When the orchestra struck up a loud march, his signal to go on, Bess pressed his hand and whispered, "Good luck," before taking her place behind him.

The stagelights gleamed against Houdini's eyes as he stepped from the wings and walked to the center of the stage. Bess followed. Beyond the lights were row on row of men and women, vague shapes in the dimness of the big theatre.

Carefully, slowly, Houdini began his introduction. "Ladies and gentlemen of the audience, it is my privilege tonight to try to demonstrate to you——"

A voice rang out. A man leaped upon the stage. "You are an imposter, a fraud!" the stranger cried. He turned and faced the audience, pointing at Houdini, claiming the center of the stage for himself. "I am the Great Cirnoc, the original Handcuff King. This man is a fake. You owe it to your self-respect not to be duped by him."

Houdini stared helplessly, completely unable to cope with the wild turn of events. His mouth worked soundlessly and he even backed away before the stranger's accusing finger. Bess was equally dumfounded. They found themselves standing almost off-stage like two culprits who had invaded a forbidden palace.

"Furthermore," Cirnoc shouted, "this man is not even an American! He has never been in the United States."

"Just a moment," another voice said, speaking from the audience, a calm and cultivated voice that carried authority. "I happen to know that Mr. Houdini is an American. I am an American, too, and my name is Chauncey M. Depew. I saw the young man in question perform a handcuff act several years ago in my country."

Houdini looked at Bess. Senator Depew, the great orator and railroad magnate! Houdini's courage came back in a rush. "Get the Bean Giant," he whispered to Bess. "We'll take care of the Great Cirnoc!"

Bess ran off stage, and returned with the giant handcuff that had been named for its inventor, a Captain Bean of Boston. The captain had offered five hundred dollars to anybody who could discover the secret of its lock, a lock made to resist any key. Houdini had been the first and only man to solve the mystery.

Now Houdini walked over to Cirnoc and said loudly, so that all could hear, "Perhaps it's time for you to prove your credentials as the Handcuff King." He held the cuffs out. "I'll give you five hundred dollars if you can free yourself from these manacles."

Cirnoc drew back haughtily. "Since this is your show, let's see you get out of them first."

Houdini obliged, asking Cirnoc to lock the cuffs on him. Then he disappeared into the small cabinet which

kept his methods secret from the audience and from other magicians. Almost at once he stepped out again, free of the cuffs.

"Your turn," Houdini said to Cirnoc with a smile, and locked the handcuffs on the other man's wrists. "In case you have trouble, here's a key."

Cirnoc retired reluctantly to the cabinet as the audience applauded Houdini's show of sportsmanship.

Houdini, completely self-possessed now, ordered the orchestra to play.

The orchestra played bar after bar, page after page. There were chuckles in the audience as Cirnoc did not appear. The chuckles grew to laughter. Finally, in the midst of the laughter, the Great Cirnoc emerged from the cabinet. Sweating and red-faced, with rage and humiliation distorting his features, he held out his handcuffed wrists and forced himself to ask Houdini to free him.

The Alhambra Theatre echoed with applause as Houdini removed the handcuffs and, bowing, accepted the ovation that swept away all fear or doubt. The English public was his. And he was its Handcuff King.

At the end of the two weeks' engagement Slater asked Houdini to continue the show through the rest of July. At the end of July Slater asked him to stay through August.

"Gladly," Houdini said, "but I won't be able to appear beyond then. I'm booked for Dresden, Germany. Then at the Wintergarten in Berlin. Then Vienna. Then——"

"Can you appear in my theatre in December?" Slater pressed.

Houdini consulted with agent Day and a return engagement at the Alhambra was arranged.

"Think of it, Bess," Houdini said to her in the dressing room the night before they were to leave for the Continent, "we're being offered more engagements than we can fill. Not bad for Dime Museum Harry, huh?"

"Nor for Dime Museum Bess, either," she laughed.

"There's only one thing missing," Houdini said. "I want to get Mother over here. And Theo. There's room for another handcuff king here. I could help Theo get started. And I could take my mother around to see her relatives in Budapest and show her off like a queen."

Before he and Bess sailed for Germany, Houdini sent a cable to Theo, urging him to come and to bring their mother with him.

The tour of Germany was a great success, even though Houdini had trouble with the over-zealous police at Dresden. He had perfected a new trick: jumping, handcuffed, from a bridge into the water. He applied to the Dresden police for permission to exhibit the stunt publicly.

The police said no, that such public displays were absolutely *verboten;* but on the advice of an officer of the secret police Houdini went ahead anyhow. When he emerged from the river, dripping, a policeman rushed forward, proclaiming "It is against the law to bathe in public!" When Houdini was brought before a magistrate, it was decided that his real crime was walking on the grass, and he was fined a few pennies, but the publicity he had received was well worth the investment.

Theo finally arrived in England in response to Houdini's urging. They celebrated Houdini's growing success together and spent hours talking. The only thing that marred Houdini's joy in the reunion was his mother's

absence. She who had shared his early defeats and struggles should be here to join in his triumphs.

"She's still worried about your not being able to afford her ship fare," Theo told him.

"I've money to throw away!"

"That's probably what you're doing with it, too," Theo said with a smile. "And I'll bet you're not getting paid as much as you deserve, either. You never were a businessman."

Theo was right on both counts but Houdini only laughed. "We'll both be rich, Dash. Look out there." They were in a London restaurant on Pall Mall. Along the sidewalk marched two men carying posters announcing HOUDINI—ALHAMBRA. "Pretty soon they'll be carrying boards advertising your stage name, 'Hardeen.'"

"Aren't you afraid of having me as a competitor?" Theo asked with a challenging grin.

Houdini said easily, "I have no competitors."

Houdini was still in England when Queen Victoria died on January 22, 1901. Passing a shop window one day, he saw a gown on display that had been designed for her. As he looked at it, he realized that Queen Victoria had been about his mother's size. An idea bloomed in his mind and he went into the shop.

"How much for that gown in the window?" he asked the shopkeeper. "The one designed for the Queen."

"Ah, that one. It is not for sale."

"It must be," Houdini insisted. "I need it."

"For whom?"

"My mother. Isn't a mother a kind of queen? Certainly mine is, and I want to treat her like one."

The shopkeeper listened to Houdini's continued appeals in astonishment, not knowing whether to be shocked or moved by such expressions of devotion. Love for one's mother was a more or less accepted fact, of course, but the English did not wear their hearts on their sleeves as this American did. The man actually did think of his mother as a queen. Well, perhaps she was.

"All right," the shopkeeper said at last. "You may have it for fifty pounds. But you must promise that it will never be worn by anyone in Great Britain."

Houdini felt like a prince as he walked out with the precious garment under his arm. Now to persuade his mother to come and wear it—not in England, for that would be a violation of his promise—but in Budapest, the town she had been forced to leave years ago under the shadow of disgrace, after his father's duel with a nobleman. She would return in triumph!

At the hotel room he wrote a long, fervent letter to his mother, begging her to come, and offering a huge surprise. Bess read the letter over his shoulder.

"I've a surprise for you, too," she said.

He looked at her expectantly, daring to hope that perhaps she was going to tell him that they were at last going to have a child.

Bess read the hope in his eyes and shook her head sadly. She brightened again and went into the adjoining room, and a series of sharp, puppy barks announced what was inside the box she brought back. Smiling, she lifted up a squirming terrier. "This is Charlie," she announced. "Charlie, shake hands with Houdini."

Fondling the puppy, Houdini said, "Shall I start practicing how to make Charlie pop out of a magic hat?"

Bess brushed at the front of her dress. "You can start practicing taking him outdoors at regular periods." She got a chain leash and snapped it to Charlie's collar.

Houdini looked at the snap-lock with amused scorn. "No dog of ours will ever stay chained with a simple lock like that!"

"Harry! You're not going to teach Charlie to be an escape artist."

"I might." Houdini broke into a laugh. "Come on, Charlie. Let's go mail a letter to the Queen of Manhattan."

Mrs. Weiss arrived at last and Houdini proceeded to treat her like visiting royalty. The climax came in Budapest where, regally erect in the embroidered gown, Cecilia Steiner Weiss sat in state in the palm garden salon of the Royal Hotel. Houdini stood at her side, accepting the good wishes and congratulations of the many cousins and great uncles and aunts crowding around the heavy gilt chair that served as his mother's throne.

"What do you think of this famous son of yours?" Mrs. Weiss's Uncle Heller asked. "Is it not wonderful to be so successful and rich?"

"He is a good boy," Mrs. Weiss answered simply, putting her arm around Houdini's waist.

Rich and famous, Houdini thought with a wry smile. Famous, yes. But he had scarcely a penny in his pocket that wasn't borrowed. For all this triumphal reception, he had had to bring his mother here from Hamburg on a second-class coach and they had sat up all night. And if the manager of the hotel hadn't offered him the palm garden room free—one of the most de luxe rooms in Europe—the whole plan would have collapsed. Now,

if he could just borrow enough money somewhere to pay for their transportation back to the coast . . .

He refused to worry. Another round of engagements and he would have plenty of money again. Everybody was after him now to appear at one theatre after another—in Paris, Hanover, Bremen, Copenhagen. Perhaps he would even go to Russia.

He exchanged a smile with Bess who, in a new dress and a fur cape, looked almost as regal as his mother.

When, at last, the reception was over and he escorted his mother and Bess to their lodgings, he felt that he had attained a peak in his career. Looking at his mother, hearing her excited talk about the affair, he knew that all his efforts had been worth while.

He and his mother talked far into the night. Then, when she and Bess were finally in bed, Houdini sat for another hour working on a new stunt he wanted to exhibit at the next show. He had at last made the world, or a part of the world, accept the handcuff act on which he had labored so long. But, in time, audiences would get bored. Also, there were more and more handcuff experts springing up all over. In order to maintain his place as Houdini the Great he must always have something new to offer, something more difficult, more daring. . . .

When morning came and it was time to take his mother to the port from which she would sail homeward to America, he showed no ill effects from the short two hours of sleep he had managed. He seldom slept more than five hours a night. He had never needed more than that. That still left only nineteen hours of the day to do all he wanted to do, and nineteen hours a day was scarcely enough.

MAGIC AND MIRACLES

Everywhere, in England and on the Continent, going from one triumph to another, Houdini's first act on reaching a new city was to challenge the police to confine him. Time after time he escaped from the most intricate shackles the police could devise. Houdini's reputation spread across Europe. He seemed a miracle man, a superhuman. How else, people asked, could he escape from jail cells, trunks, bags, handcuffs and ropes?

Some theorized that he was able to make his hands smaller than his wrists and thereby slip out of handcuffs, and superstitious persons believed that he was in league with spirits, but Houdini was always the first to disclaim any abilities beyond those of ordinary human beings. Although he kept the secrets of his greatest tricks from other professional magicians, confiding them only to Bess or his assistants, he publicly repeated that any man could achieve what he did with sufficient practice. His greatest secret, however, was his conquest of fear. On those occasions when he leaped from a bridge with his hands and legs shackled, he needed complete mental composure in order to work with the lightning speed required. If anything went wrong, panic could be fatal.

The second half of his secret was physical training. Every muscle in his body—those of his shoulders, wrists, ankles, thighs, torso—had to be prepared to work at his bidding, from the greatest muscle to the least. His fingers had to be supremely dexterous, and where his fingers could not work, his toes had to do the job.

"Genius must be born, and never can be taught," the poet John Dryden had said. Houdini, however, had taught himself everything he knew, patiently and stubbornly, never quitting until he had mastered a problem. His kind of genius was the kind described as "an infinite capacity for taking pains." No detail of his training or preparation was too small to receive his attention. None was too large to dim his courage.

Nevertheless, even his muscles and courage were often strained. In Hanover, Germany where he had escaped from all the regular restraints, the chief of police, Count Shwerin, suggested that a strait jacket be put on Houdini.

"You will not get out of this, I assure you," the count told Houdini as he had his assistants strap the magician into an especially heavy jacket reinforced with stiff leather.

Houdini had not done any strait jacket escapes for some time and when he saw the jacket brought forward he knew that he was in for an ordeal. Concealing his trepidation with a confident smile, he stood silent as a group of policemen thrust his arms into the sleeves, which were sewn shut at the ends, and then pulled his arms across his chest and fastened the sleeve ends at the back with buckles and straps. A high leather collar pressed against Houdini's neck, so tightly that he almost choked. At last the policemen stood back, satisfied and

confident that this was one restraint from which Houdini would never escape.

Grimly, Houdini began to fight with his muscles to try to gain a little slack in the garment so that he could bring his arms up over his head and thus get the sleeve buckles in reach of his teeth. That done, he would be able to work through the heavy canvas with his fingers and undo the buckles holding the jacket together behind his back.

But the canvas this time was like iron. Before he had struggled very long his body was soaked with perspiration. He still had his regular clothes on under the jacket and he heard their seams burst and rip as he alternately stretched his muscles and then relaxed them, striving desperately to loosen the restraining jacket.

Five minutes went by as he struggled. Then ten. Fifteen. A half hour. At the end of an hour he was still struggling, panting from his exertions, sweat running from his forehead and down over the jacket like rain. His muscles ached bitterly.

Silently, Count Schwerin and his crew looked on in mingled pity and triumph. Houdini had met his match.

He struggled on. There, he had got his arms over his head! His teeth worked at the straps. Shaking perspiration from his head and hair, he moved his hands around to the back and stood fumbling through the thick canvas, trying to unbuckle the back straps. Working through the heavy material was like working with thick mittens on.

Then, suddenly, the buckles gave. With a final effort, Houdini flung the jacket from him and stood trembling, his body aching with bruises, his clothes in tatters.

That night he wrote in his notes that he would never

forget the "pain, torture, agony, and misery of mind" of his struggle. But the shouts of acclaim from all over Germany were medicine to his bruised body. And when he left Hanover for Paris he was hired at a salary higher than any that had ever been paid before to a foreign performer.

Among the thousands praising Houdini, one person, at least, was not impressed. She was the widow of Houdini's hero, Robert-Houdin. When Houdini discovered that she was still living he wrote to her, asking permission to call.

Mme. Robert-Houdin answered his letter with a curt note. He had had no right to borrow her husband's name, she wrote. As for the recent pilgrimage Houdini had made to Robert-Houdin's grave, where he had placed a wreath, she considered it a cheap publicity stunt.

Bess was with Houdini when he received the widow's letter, and she was alarmed at the white shock and fury on his face.

"She calls me an upstart!" Houdini cried, leaping from his chair. "I, who have helped to make her husband's name famous. Did he ever have the crowds following him that I have? No! It's I who have added glory to his name, not the other way around. People will remember the name of Houdini when the name of Robert-Houdin has vanished from the earth."

As Bess tried to calm him she realized that only part of Houdini's outburst was caused by rage. At least half of his emotion was extreme hurt. He had just had a slap in the face from someone closely associated with the hero of a lifetime.

"It's not Robert-Houdin's fault that his widow treats you like this," Bess argued.

"Perhaps not," Houdini said when he had calmed down. "Just the same, I won't forget."

Thereafter, he spoke little about Robert-Houdin, but Bess noticed that he spent more time than usual studying old books on the history of magic—volumes he bought constantly now—which made the Houdinis' baggage grow increasingly heavy. Bess still took care of most of the day-to-day details of their life, but an assistant had been hired to help her; for constant traveling, plus one show after another, made tremendous demands on her frail strength.

The demands Houdini made on himself during the continuing weeks and months of touring were even greater. Constantly he presented new surprises on the stage. He even ventured to go back to some of the old sleight-of-hand and bits of minor magic that he loved. He could palm thirty-two playing cards in one hand. He developed a needle trick in which he appeared to swallow a packet of needles and several yards of thread, and then drew the thread slowly from his mouth with all the needles threaded on it at regularly spaced intervals. At the Wintergarten in Berlin, in 1903, he had himself nailed into a big packing box by volunteer carpenters, and freed himself in short order, leaving the nails intact. At Leicester, England, he broke out of a cell that had contained many famous prisoners.

Seeking ever more daring exhibitions, he had himself chained to the arm of a huge windmill in Holland. Just as he was about to try to free himself the wing broke and he was nearly crushed to death.

Challengers, eager to try to capitalize on Houdini's

fame, came forward by the dozens. One of them, a boastful Strong Man at Blackburn, shackled Houdini so thoroughly and painfully that it took him two hours to escape—a feat that cost him torn clothes and bleeding arms.

Others came forward with bribes and crooked schemes. One, an Englishman who had been a hangman, offered to wager several thousand dollars that he could tie Houdini up so that he could not escape. Then, said the hangman, if Houdini would pretend that he could not get free, he would split the money with him.

Houdini dismissed the ex-hangman with contempt, as he did all other such schemers.

He was now earning a thousand dollars or more a week. Theo, too, was achieving success under the name of Hardeen.

Bess spoke wistfully of returning home. Perhaps now, she thought, her mother would at last accept Houdini. But Houdini was not yet ready to try his luck back in America. "Bess, I want to go to Russia. Day is writing to the authorities there. Maybe I can perform before the Tsar himself."

Getting into Russia, Houdini found, was not quite as simple as getting out of a nailed packing case! Passports had to be obtained. Long questionnaires had to be filled out. There was the Russian language to be learned —or at least enough of it so that Houdini could make his stage speeches in Russian. This was a custom he practiced in all countries he visited.

When Houdini and Bess and their assistants finally crossed the Russian border in May, 1903, one of the first things Houdini did was to ask the manager of the

theatre where he was to appear to listen to the speech he had prepared in Russian.

The manager listened with a look of growing distress. When Houdini had finished, the manager cried, "If you perform your stunts the way you talk Russian we are ruined! What you're speaking is Polish—and that's forbidden here—and on top of that, you're speaking it with a Jewish accent."

Crestfallen, Houdini went to work to learn the speech all over again. Walking around Moscow, he practiced the speech aloud as he went, reciting in Russian that he was the handcuff king and the greatest of jail breakers and that no prison could hold him. He was congratulating himself on his mastery of the speech when a small army of policemen surrounded him, handcuffed him, and rushed him off to prison as a maniac.

Back at the hotel where the Houdinis were staying, Bess waited for Houdini to appear for dinner. Dinnertime came and no Houdini. Alarmed, Bess called the theatre manager. The manager, in turn, called the police. Yes, said the police, they had a Mr. Houdini locked up. He was a madman.

Bess and the manager hurried to the prison. There sat Houdini, securely locked in a cell with a band of guards watching over him.

"I thought you could get out of any jail," the manager taunted.

"I've been busy concentrating on my speech," Houdini replied with a weak smile.

It was the only cell in Europe that ever held Houdini and it took a few serious explanations by Bess and the manager to make him a free man again.

A few days later, Houdini redeemed his reputation by

permitting himself to be bound in a Russian *carette* which was like a giant strong box on wheels, lined with steel. The only key for unlocking the box was hundreds of miles away in Siberia. After forty-five minutes of struggle, Houdini escaped.

The Russian public took Houdini to its heart. So did Russian royalty. At St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) he tried his skill on a metal trunk which the Grand Duke Sergius had had made by the finest locksmiths, designed so that it could not be unlocked. Houdini unlocked it!

Houdini's earnings reached new highs as he returned to England to perform at London's Hippodrome in March 1904 and to face some of the most difficult challenges he had ever faced. He was equal to any and all of them, but the challenge of America remained. Could he conquer his homeland as he had England and Europe? At last he decided to try.

When he and Bess sailed for home that spring, their luggage contained one of the finest collections of books on magic in existence, together with thousands of old theatre programs, including those of Robert-Houdin. The hurt that Houdini had suffered at the hands of Robert-Houdin's widow had turned to complete disillusionment in the magician himself. Doggedly, Houdini had investigated every aspect of his former hero's life and found that many of the "miracles" Robert-Houdin claimed to have invented had been in existence long before. Even the "memoirs" which Houdini had pored over years before with such admiration had been written by a hired ghost writer.

Remembering how, as a boy, he had worshipped the very name of Robert-Houdin, Houdini felt betrayed. Where Robert-Houdin had claimed to be the inventor

of a new trick, Houdini had never questioned the claim, any more than he had questioned that the magician had been the author of his own words. To have one's name on a book written by someone else seemed to Houdini a form of cheating.

What hurt the most, and stung his pride, was the realization that if he had not been so blinded by hero worship he would have seen through some of the obvious fiction in Robert-Houdin's autobiography.

"You're taking it too seriously," Bess told him, amazed at how upset he was, and tempted to add that even he stretched facts a little sometimes to make a trick or stunt seem more exciting. "It isn't like you to be so bitter."

Houdini scarcely heard. He was thinking of the book he himself would write, a book unmasking his former hero as a fraud.

He did write the book, and started a controversy in magical circles which still goes on. He vented all of his bitterness in his account of Robert-Houdin, and was criticized for this, although nobody has ever questioned his authority on the subject. Having been hurt, he tried to retaliate. It was one of the few times in his career when the darker, unforgiving side of his nature showed through. Some who knew him said that he did later regret writing the book; others stated just as firmly that he did not.

Houdini and Bess spent only eleven weeks back in the United States. Although contracts were offered to him, the salary that went with them was considerably less than he had received in Europe; and, compared with the attention Europe had given him, America's

enthusiasm seemed only lukewarm. Houdini instructed Day to get him bookings in Europe again. Then he took a vacation—a vacation crammed with activity.

First he bought a large brownstone house on West 113th Street in New York, a house big enough for the whole Weiss family. "You'll never have to worry about having a roof over your head," Houdini told his mother. "Nor any of the rest of the family."

Once installed in the new house, Houdini spent hours arranging and cataloging the library he had brought from Europe, and filing away countless curios. He spent the rest of his free time in practicing old and new tricks and supervising the construction of a tremendous bathroom in the house. The bathroom was built with a tub large enough for him to submerge himself completely and there practice underwater feats. Beside the tub was a wall-sized mirror in which he could watch himself and correct flaws in his performance.

Before leaving for Europe in August, he took a brief trip back to his home town of Appleton, Wisconsin. As he was walking along a street across from the offices of the local newspaper, a dark-haired young woman with a businesslike air approached him, introduced herself as the reporter from the *Appleton Crescent* and said she wanted to do a story on him for her paper.

Houdini stopped to chat, pleased at the attention. He had imagined his return to his birthplace as a climactic event, complete with bands and cheers. Instead, the town had seemed to accept his presence with a minimum of excitement, going about its daily business as usual. Now, talking to the earnest girl reporter in front of a drug store, he felt reassured.

Leaning back against what he thought was a post, he

discovered it was the drug store's dispensing machine for chocolates and gum. Carelessly, his hand wandered behind his back and encountered the machine's padlock.

"Thank you, Mr. Houdini," the girl said finally, ending the interview. "I'll go back to the office to write the story now."

"First," Houdini said, "maybe you'd better take this in to the proprietor of the drug store. Otherwise, somebody might steal his chewing gum." He held the padlock out to her in the palm of his hand and then walked on, grinning at the stupefaction on the girl's face.

Years later, when she was a famous novelist, the girl reporter, Edna Ferber, wrote about her meeting with the Handcuff King.

At the end of August, Houdini returned to Europe, where he continued to meet all challenges and played to packed houses wherever he went. Newspapers headlined the stories of his exploits. Finally, the echoes of European cheers reached America so loudly that they could no longer be ignored. In the spring of 1905, a cable was received asking Houdini to appear for six weeks in the larger cities of the United States for five thousand dollars. The tide was turning.

In late July, Houdini sailed for home, scheduled to appear as the star at New York's Colonial Theatre. He was thirty-one, rich and famous at an age when many men have barely discovered what they want to do with their lives. Houdini had actually begun his career more than twenty years before, sitting on a circus magician's knee in a small circus side show, and since then every

moment, almost every thought, had been devoted to this end.

There was one thing still needed to make the Houdinis' happiness complete: a reconciliation with Bess's mother. Fate took a hand and Houdini, always alert, seized the opportunity to accomplish what twelve years of letters and pleas had not been able to do.

Bess became ill in the fall after they returned to America. It was not a serious illness, nor a long-lasting one, but Houdini promptly went to Mrs. Rahner's house and knocked on the door. Before his mother-in-law could close the door in his face, he stepped inside and said firmly, "Bess is sick and she needs you. I want you to go to her."

"She's managed to get along without me for all these years," Mrs. Rahner replied. "Why should I go to her now?"

"Because," Houdini said, "I'm not going to move out of this house until you do! If you'd prefer my company to that of your sick daughter, that's up to you." He sat down with an expression that said he would stay forever, if need be.

In the end, Mrs. Rahner gave way. On the way to the brownstone house on West 113th Street she looked at Houdini and forced a smile.

Houdini smiled back. The long war was ended.

A BAG OF GOLD

A huge crowd stood shivering in the early winter cold on a bridge in Detroit. Below, the river water had frozen solid during the night.

"He'll never jump off the bridge now," one of the men in the crowd said. "Even Houdini won't take a risk like that." He pointed to a hole that had been sawed in the ice. From above, it looked like a tiny, blue-green polka dot surrounded by whiteness.

The man had scarcely finished speaking when the police began to make a path through the crowd, calling, "Make way here—give us room."

A group of men made their way forward. At their head was Harry Houdini, wearing a heavy coat. The wind whipped the coat back, revealing white bathing trunks beneath. With Houdini was one of his assistants, Franz Kukol. Another assistant followed, carrying a coil of rope. Mrs. Houdini, the crowd noticed, was not there.

One of the audience volunteered to his neighbor, "I heard she doesn't like to watch these water stunts of his. Scare her, she says. That's the story, anyhow. Says they're too dangerous." The speaker shrugged skeptically. "Probably all put on for effect."

Reporters crowded around Houdini as he stripped to his trunks and held his hands out to the police to be manacled.

"If you don't drown, Houdini," one of the reporters said, "you'll die of pneumonia. That's an awful shock to the system, plunging into that ice bath down there."

"I'm used to it," Houdini said. "I take an ice bath in my own tub every morning. Of course, I'll admit it gives me goose-pimples."

When all was ready, he mounted the parapet of the bridge. As he looked down at the small hole in the ice, he thought of the many times he had leaped from bridges, all over the United States and all over Europe. This was the first time, though, that he had dared to defy a covering of solid ice. He glanced toward the assistant with the rope, making sure that the man was alert. In case Houdini did not come to the surface in three minutes, the assistant was to lower himself by the rope, plunge into the icy water, and haul Houdini out. The assistant was Houdini's life insurance, although the crowd was not aware that the man had any special purpose in being there.

"I'm ready," Houdini said. "Give me a good push."

He went plunging through the air, the handcuffs shining, his naked legs and arms glinting in the cold sunlight before he disappeared under the water.

His body recoiled from the shock of the river as he sank to the bottom. Faint, murky light came down through the hole in the ice as he worked at the handcuffs. He was vaguely aware of a tugging movement at his legs, but he paid little attention, concentrating on unlocking the handcuffs. Quickly, he opened them and started upward, thinking that he had succeeded in

getting free of the cuffs in less time than usual. Now to clamber out, hurry to shore, and get his warm coat around him again.

His head grazed something white and unyielding. Ice! Houdini peered through the murk, searching. There was nothing but ice above him. Somehow, he had lost the opening. He swam downward again and looked up, trying to spot the circle of light that would indicate the hole. It was nowhere to be seen. The tugging he had felt at his body was the river's current. How far it had swept him from the escape portal he did not know.

Fear nudged him. He forced it away, commanding himself, "Think! Think calmly now, or you're done for." With iron restraint, he let himself up gently toward the gray-white roof of ice, a roof seemingly as endless and permanent as the white lid of a marble tomb.

On the bridge, the shivering crowd waited. Any second they expected to see Houdini emerge, triumphant. After all, nothing had ever conquered him yet —neither witches' cages, nor iron boxes, nor huge paper bags that he got out of without any sign of a cut or tear in the paper afterwards.

"He's staying down longer than usual just to give the crowd an extra thrill," one spectator ventured.

But as the seconds ticked off, one after another, until two full minutes had gone by, the skeptics grew silent. Ordinarily, Houdini accomplished such a feat in a little over a minute.

"Maybe his hands are too numb for him to unfasten the handcuffs," a reporter said.

The hole in the ice stared back at the watchers like an eye. Cold. Empty. Three minutes went by.

The assistant with the rope moved belatedly toward

the parapet, beginning to fumble at the robe with numb hands. He eyed the hole below with a shiver, fastened one end of the rope to the bridge and started to let it down, though his instructions were to go down with it.

Several police surgeons and a couple of physicians who were in the crowd shook their heads. "Four minutes!" one of them exclaimed. "Houdini's performed his last trick."

With a final glance at the river, reporters began running toward telephones or their offices. "Houdini's trapped under the river!" they cried. "Drowned. Dead!"

Printing presses ground into action. Swiftly, newsboys with "extras" ran out onto the streets of the city, crying, "Extra! Extra! Houdini dead. Miracle Man Succumbs to River! Extra. Read about Houdini's Fatal Leap!"

From her bed in the hotel room, where she was nursing a cold, Bess heard the cries. She ran to a window and opened it as an attendant with her called out, "You mustn't get in a draft, Mrs. Houdini."

Bess did not hear. All she heard were the newsboys crying their incredible, heart-chilling cries. Clinging weakly to the window sill, she ordered, "Go get a paper!"

As the woman ran out, Bess slumped into a chair by the window. Charlie, the terrier, leaped up, putting his paws on her knees, licking her hand. "Charlie, I don't believe it!" Bess exclaimed. She picked him up, stroking him mindlessly.

The woman returned with the paper. "It's true!" she cried, holding the paper out, displaying the bitter headline. "Oh, you poor girl, you poor——"

There were footsteps in the hallway. The door swung open. Houdini stood there with water dripping from his face and hair, shivering, his cheeks gray with cold. He ran to Bess and shook her. "I'm alive! Sweetheart—it's me, Harry. I'm not dead—no matter what the papers say."

Bess could not speak. She could only hold him close, her hands warming the cold cheeks while she laughed hysterically with relief. "But you're shivering! You will die if you don't get warm." She ran to the bathroom and began to fill the tub with hot water. "Fix some hot tea," she called to the attendant.

When he got into the bathtub and lay soaking in the hot water, Houdini felt a final chill go through him. It had been a narrow escape, as narrow as any he had ever had. Only presence of mind had saved him, the sudden thought that there might be air between the surface of the water and the roof of ice. There had been: a bare half inch. But the half inch of air had saved him. Floating on his back, his nose scraping the ice, he had managed to suck in enough of the life-giving oxygen to fill his lungs so that he could swim around again in search of the opening in the ice. After each search he would float upward and try to get more air again before he strangled. It had seemed an hour before something whisked through the water and he had swum toward it, recognizing the life rope.

Rubbing himself now, Houdini began to sing with the joy of being alive. Back in the dime museum days he had had to sing for his supper sometimes, but the audiences had always covered their ears. Now, when he came out of the bath with his robe around him, Bess said enthusiastically, "Don't stop singing, Harry. It's the most beautiful sound in the world."

She sneezed.

"Get back to bed," he said. "Do you want me to catch your cold?"

A recent biographer has discounted the story of Houdini's being trapped under the ice, saying that there was no ice on the river at the time. However, according to other biographers, and Houdini's own reports, the leap did take place as described, in the early winter of 1906.

Whether this story is true or not, or whether it can be proved one way or another, Houdini did have many narrow escapes. One of them occurred when he was doing a high dive into a Y.M.C.A. tank at Pittsburgh, as part of a drive to raise funds for the institution. He made an error in judgment, crashed his head against the tank's cement bottom and was carried out unconscious. The resulting scar stayed with him the rest of his life.

Imitators of Houdini's stunts had far worse experiences. Some, trying to duplicate his leaps from bridges, drowned. Would-be escape artists occasionally came near suffocation in packing cases or trunks and had to be rescued. Others, using fraudulent methods, suffered humiliation when they were exposed.

Houdini's boast that he had no competitors was the truth, and the nations on both sides of the Atlantic ocean recognized it as such. Furthermore, Houdini was becoming an author, in line with his determination to try to make himself a scholar as well as an escape artist. He was constantly at work on his book, *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin,* and he had begun to publish a monthly magazine for magicians called *The Conjurer's Magazine.* He had a secretary, and he added two more assistants to his show troupe, James Collins and James

Vickery. They, along with Franz Kukol, were to remain with Houdini all the rest of his life.

In the spring of 1908 Houdini presented a new feature, one too dangerous for even the most ambitious competitors to try to imitate. It involved working under water, to Bess's distress, but in this case no bridge leap was required. Houdini would lower himself into a large iron can filled with water higher than his head, after which a lid would be locked in place with a dozen or more padlocks. From this Houdini would escape, leaving the can filled to the brim, with the padlocks still in place. It was a bewildering feat and one that made headlines grow larger. Even Bess could not fathom the trick.

In Europe again in the fall of 1908, Houdini brought the water can trick to perfection and began hunting around for ways to make it even more difficult. He abandoned his handcuff feats, knowing that the public would be bored with repetition, and specialized in the water can trick and escapes from packing boxes and straight jackets. Challengers still came forward to pit their skill against his. Among these were professional swimmers who declared that they could stay under water longer than Houdini. The swimmer who came closest to Houdini's mark stayed under for two and a quarter minutes. Houdini, climbing into the same tank, stayed submerged for three minutes and thirty-two seconds.

During a week's engagement in Belfast, Ireland, twenty thousand eager ticket seekers for a Houdini performance were turned away.

High dives from bridges over rivers or harbors in France, Germany, and England became routine, with

his legs chained as well as his hands. In Scotland, in the summer of 1909, Houdini dived in heavy chains from the bridge of a tug in the harbor of Aberdeen in such a gale that the tug was the only boat that dared to venture out. His only spectators were the newsmen and the boat crew on board.

For recreation he kept up his search for rare books, visited with other magicians, restored and kept up the graves of magicians who had died, explored one city after another, conducted a vast correspondence, studied French and, with Bess, trained a number of young women in underwater feats with the idea of starting an aquatic circus. He also developed an interest in pictures and began to collect paintings, etchings, and prints.

But in the summer of 1909 when their terrier, Charlie, got sick, almost all activity stopped for Bess and Houdini. They spent days and nights caring for the sick pet before they took him to a veterinarian, who told them there was no hope. When the dog died, Houdini wept unashamedly. "Poor dear little Charlie dog," he grieved in his diary. "He has been our only pet and earned our love. Now he is out of his misery."

As soon as possible he and Bess acquired another terrier, Bobby, and Houdini began to teach the dog to escape from handcuffs. "He'll be the only dog in dogdom to be an escape artist," Houdini asserted. The dog learned to shake the cuffs from his legs but he never became a serious competitor to his master.

Life for the Houdinis was so full it seemed there could not be room for anything more. But there was. While playing in Hamburg, Houdini saw his first airplane. It was a crude, flimsy contraption looking more

like a box kite than a flying machine. A German aviator at the Hamburg race track got it into the air and actually circled the track with it, and Houdini's eyes lighted up as if he had just witnessed the greatest of all magical feats.

Racing across the field as the aviator was climbing down from the machine, he cried, "Where can I buy a machine like that? How much is it?"

"A Voisin plane like this," the pilot told him, "costs about twenty-two thousand francs."

"I'll get one!"

Before a week was over Houdini was the proud owner of a Voisin and had hired a wooden shed to shelter it. Thoughts of books and paintings vanished. Every morning he hurried out to the shed in a taxicab and tinkered with the marvelous flying machine, waiting for the day when he dared to take it up into the air. High winds kept him grounded at first, and he fretted. Then came a calm morning with a promise of peaceful blue skies.

At dawn Houdini clambered into the plane. Bess stood watching, wringing her hands.

The engine sputtered into life. The propeller whirled. The spindly wheels of the undercarriage moved and the plane rocked across the ground. Fluttering, swaying, the machine went drunkenly into the air, hovered above the earth for a few seconds, and then plopped to earth like a stunned bird.

Houdini, too, was stunned as he crawled out of the damaged airplane. Sadly, he looked at the smashed propeller. Then his face brightened. He had stayed up in the air several seconds, at least. Even the best aviators—and there weren't many of them in the world—had

stayed up for no more than a few minutes. The airplane could be repaired. Everything considered, things hadn't turned out too badly after all.

"I hope you've learned your lesson," Bess said, looking past him at the battered plane. "You could have broken your neck."

"I merely broke the plane's nose," Houdini said.

The Houdinis were scheduled to appear in Australia at the beginning of 1910. When they left Europe, the Voisin went with them on the same ship. By this time Houdini had spent hundreds of dollars on the machine, and he had hired a French mechanic to go along with him to Australia.

The presence of the airplane on shipboard filled Houdini with pride but did nothing to ward off seasickness. By the time he reached Australia he was twenty-five pounds lighter than when he had left Marseilles.

"That much less weight for the flying machine to carry," he commented, running his hand through his thick, wavy hair—hair that was beginning to be etched with gray.

Day after day, between shows, Houdini went out to a field beyond Melbourne and tried to coax his unwieldy airplane into the air. He had his name painted in big letters on the wings. Crowds came to watch his flying attempts and Houdini, ever generous, saw to it that they were supplied with food and refreshments. Bess was kept busy handing out goodies from the baskets she and the assistants brought.

On one bright March day Houdini made three successful flights in succession, the longest one lasting a little more than six minutes. It was a real triumph in a new field of adventure, and the crowd cheered

mightily. The Australian Aeronautic League presented Houdini with a trophy as the first successful aviator in Australia.

Thereafter Houdini made one flight after another, often in strong winds. He spent so much time with the biplane that he suffered from physical and nervous exhaustion.

"Flying, with you, is getting to be a disease, Harry," Bess said one day. "You may not wreck the plane but you'll wreck yourself. I can't understand why you like flying so when you won't drive an automobile."

"You know what happens when I try to drive an automobile," Houdini reminded her. Driving bored Houdini, and he became so absent-minded that he was apt to drive right off the road when some interesting feature of the landscape caught his attention. "I enjoy flying," he told Bess. "It's a real challenge."

Nevertheless, he knew that she was right. There wasn't time or energy enough in one lifetime to devote to flying and to his real career too. And nothing must interfere with the career to which he had devoted all his mind and heart.

He had the plane crated and took it with him when he and Bess sailed for Vancouver in May, but he had already made up his mind. He would not fly again.

All through the summer and winter of 1910 and 1911 Houdini played to packed houses in the United States and in Europe. He undertook a new escape feat, struggling out of wet, tightly wrapped sheets and bandages that made him look like a mummy strapped to a cot. It was one of the most difficult stunts he had attempted. This, along with all his other hazardous

feats, put an increasing strain on his body. In spite of Bess's protests, and warning aches and pains in his flesh, he would not let up. Even when he had to have a minor operation because of an abscess that had developed on his body as a result of his daily struggles with strait jackets and other confinements, he shrugged it off as insignificant.

However, when he was playing in Detroit in October, 1911, he began to experience pain in his lower back and groin. For three weeks he tried to ignore the increasing pain, going on with his tour. Finally, in Pittsburgh, Bess forced him to go and see a doctor.

"One of your kidneys has been injured," the doctor told him. "You'll have to take a long rest and give up all the most strenuous parts of your show."

"I can't do that," Houdini protested. "That's like saying I should give up my whole career."

"It's your career or your life." The doctor looked at him somberly. "If you keep on as you have been, you'll be dead within a year."

"I'll take a bet on that," Houdini answered. He took his hat and left. He'd show that doctor, he thought—and he would keep the doctor's warning to himself. If Bess or his mother knew of it, they would insist that he go to bed and stay there. There was plenty of time for a little bed rest—after he had finished his present engagement.

Still in great pain, he completed the remaining three days of the show in Pittsburgh and then went home to New York to rest for two weeks instead of the months the doctor had recommended. Once the two weeks were over he went on tour again, performing the same violent escapes. Added to the pain of his kidney was that of a

torn ligament, but he continued to perform as usual. His only concession to bodily weakness was sleeping with a pillow under his side to try to protect the ruptured kidney from pressure.

In the spring of 1912, Houdini was preparing still more difficult feats. He had not yet won over the New York newspapers to his satisfaction. In early July he announced that he would escape from a weighted packing box tossed into the harbor from an East River pier. Crowds of skeptical reporters arrived to watch, together with at least twelve cameramen. Pier 6 was jammed with people. A group of policemen clustered around Houdini and his attendants.

"Look here, Houdini," one of the officers said, "you can't jump off this pier. We don't allow anybody to commit suicide here."

Houdini argued in vain. "We'll get a tug, then," he said and sent his assistants into action. A tug, the *Catherine Moran,* was hired. Houdini, followed by the reporters and cameramen, stepped on board.

The crowd howled in protest as the tug began to draw away toward Ellis Island. One small boy among the spectators cried suddenly, "Wait for me!" He pulled his clothes off, revealing a bathing suit underneath, plunged into the water, and swam after the tug. Houdini's assistants helped the boy aboard and Houdini gave him an admiring pat on the back.

Near Ellis Island, Houdini stripped down to a spotless white bathing suit. The reporters helped to manacle him and supervised the nailing up of the box. A steel band was strapped around the box for extra security and the cumbersome article, Houdini inside, was lowered into the water. Fifty-seven seconds later Houdini

emerged from the river. The box was then brought up, with its nails and steel band in place. When it was opened, the handcuffs and leg irons were lying in the bottom of the box, with their locks sprung.

Houdini got his headlines—and got some more when he undertook to wriggle out of a whole assortment of knots and hitches while hanging head down from a skyscraper scaffold twenty stories above the street.

For a man who had been condemned to death, he was doing very well. And when a year had passed from the time of his interview with the Pittsburgh doctor, he sent the physician a triumphant note, enclosing photographs of himself, performing his latest feats.

There was still another triumph at about the same time. Houdini was now earning a thousand dollars a week for his performances at Oscar Hammerstein's New Victoria Roof Garden in New York. At the end of his first week's show he asked for his salary in gold. The astonished cashier finally granted his request.

With a heavy bag of gold in his hand, Houdini hurried home and stood before his mother, his eyes shining. "Many years ago I made a promise to Pa that you'd never have to go in want. Sit down and hold your skirt out!"

Mrs. Weiss did as she was told, looking perplexed.

"There!" Houdini poured the glittering gold coins in her lap.

Dumbfounded, Mrs. Weiss looked up at her son. "I could never be in want as long as I had a son like you, Erich," she said, calling him by the name he had almost forgotten. Tears glimmered in her eyes as Houdini kissed her and held her hands. Nothing he had ever done had given him a greater thrill.

ORDEAL

Houdini was in Denmark in July, 1913, when he received a cable saying that his mother had had a stroke and was not expected to live. For the first time in his career Houdini broke his contract. He and Bess packed hastily, took a train to an embarkation point, and sailed for home, but they arrived too late. Houdini's "sainted mother," as he called her, was dead.

For a whole month afterward, Houdini forgot his work entirely. Every day he went to his mother's grave, sometimes alone, sometimes with Bess. Never one to repress emotion, Houdini often threw himself on the grave and cried aloud. At home, cloistered with his mother's letters, he wept anew as he read her expressions of affection mingled with prayers that he and his brothers and sisters would always have God's protection and be good human beings.

Even after the first shock of his mother's death was over, Houdini was melancholy and preoccupied. Bess watched apprehensively, waiting for the bright sparkle and basic joy of Houdini's nature to reappear. Finally, she knew that Houdini would never be quite the same again. There would always be a note of sadness under

his laughter, a shadow in the blue-gray eyes even when he smiled.

Grimly, Houdini went back to work. On tour in Edinburgh he celebrated his fortieth birthday, and in London he presided at the first annual dinner of the Magicians' Club, which he and another magician, Will Goldston, had founded a year before. Although he was still performing his strenuous escape acts, he was featuring regular magical tricks as well—among them the Paligenesia illusion which he had seen performed by Dr. Lynn in Milwaukee years before. He had purchased the trick and made it his own.

Shortly before the beginning of World War I, the Houdinis were passengers on shipboard with former President Theodore Roosevelt. Houdini and the ex-President became friends on shipboard. One day when Houdini's seasickness was under control enough for him to take a morning stroll on deck with Roosevelt, Roosevelt asked him to give a performance at the next ship concert.

"How about giving us a séance?" Roosevelt suggested, referring to the kind of session held by persons believing in the possibility of communicating with the dead through the help of an especially sensitive person known as a "medium."

Houdini agreed, and the next night he asked Roosevelt to write a question on a slip of paper. Roosevelt took every precaution to ensure that Houdini could not see what he wrote, which was: "Where was I last Christmas?" He then folded the paper, sealed it in an envelope, and slipped it between two slates which Houdini had given him. The slates had been tied together.

Houdini untied the slates and showed them to the

former President. On one slate was a drawing of a part of South America that Roosevelt had explored the year before, with an arrow pointing to a certain spot and a caption stating, "Near the Andes."

Roosevelt was thunderstruck. The map identified exactly the region where he had been the previous Christmas, and yet there appeared to be no way in which Houdini could have known. Also, if he had known, and had written the answer on the slate before coming into the room, how could he have been certain just what question would be asked?

"You must really be in touch with the spirits!" Roosevelt said.

Houdini smiled and shook his head. "I'm afraid not. That was just a trick—a lucky one, at that."

It had been a combination of luck and preparation. Before sailing, Houdini had found out that Roosevelt was to be a passenger on the ship and he had at once done some research on Roosevelt's whereabouts during the past year. Although Roosevelt had been very careful to write his question in secret, Houdini had managed with extreme casualness to push a book at him at the last minute, saying, "Here, sir, rest your slip of paper on that." Under the book's cover a piece of carbon paper had been inserted. By a quick, secret glance, Houdini could easily see what Roosevelt had written. Luck, and some power of suggestion on Houdini's part, had resulted in the right question's appearing—its answer already having been written on the slate. Preparation, luck—and Houdini's consummate skill at manipulating his materials so that audiences saw only what he wanted them to see.

Roosevelt became a Houdini fan along with the

thousands of others who watched the "miracle man" perform regularly at Hammerstein's, where he mystified everyone by seeming to walk straight through a brick wall; or at the New York Hippodrome, where, with the wave of a magic wand, he made a living elephant vanish before the audience's eyes.

In Los Angeles Houdini had a narrow escape. He accepted a challenge to be manacled and buried six feet deep under the ground. When he was covered with the earth he experienced a rare moment of panic. This was a real grave! Horror gripped him. He began clawing at the earth like a mole, using all his strength. Earth pressed at his shoulders and head and body and eyes and he felt his strength begin to fail. The horror intensified. He gave a yell, or tried to. Sand poured into his mouth. Blindly, his panic giving him fresh energy, he kept clawing at the black walls. Finally, a trickle of light appeared. In a moment he burst free and stood wild-eyed and chalky pale on the surface again, breathing great gulps of air.

"The next time I am buried," he declared, "it will not be alive if I can help it."

Fire had its dangers, too, and Houdini found that out in another narrow escape. He had himself chained to a stake in a ring of burning faggots, estimating that he could free himself in a little over a minute. But some boys had poured kerosene on the faggots to make them burn better and the wind blew the flames and fumes into Houdini's face. His clothes were beginning to burn by the time he got free.

Among the most hazardous challenges Houdini accepted was being locked inside a safe. He was locked in safes of many makes and sizes, releasing the lock

mechanism from inside with the help of a small screwdriver smuggled in with him. Speed was necessary because of the small amount of air in the safe. If, somehow, the apparatus should become jammed there was practically no way for others to free him except by dynamiting the safe.

With the United States' entry into the European War in 1916, Houdini immediately canceled many of his engagements and toured the military camps and canteens, giving free shows to the soldiers. Along with his free magic he gave away five-dollar gold pieces, which he appeared to pick from the air before tossing them at the soldiers. Performing in one camp after another, traveling constantly (all at his own expense), selling Liberty Bonds, he was putting almost as much strain on his body as when he did escape acts every day. For underwater operations he even invented a diving suit, which he presented to the Navy Department.

When Bess cautioned, "Harry, you can't go on spending yourself like this," he answered that he had never felt better.

Toward the end of the war he developed a great interest in the moving picture industry and performed in a number of movies. While he was on location on Catalina Island, off the southern coast of California, he had a close brush with death. In the midst of a powerful gale, he saw a small launch offshore which was being swept toward the rocks. Houdini tied a rope about his waist, jumped from a cliff at the water's edge, and swam toward the launch. But even he could not cope with the battering waves and the submerged rocks. Cut and bleeding and half conscious, he was finally rescued by men in a lifeboat who went out to save him.

His movie career was handicapped by two things. Audiences were already used to seeing actors perform miraculous leaps and escapes from danger; the movie camera could make anything seem possible. Besides, Houdini could never get any real emotion into his love scenes. The thought of having to kiss any other woman but Bess—especially with Bess standing watching the shooting of a scene—made him freeze. During an interview by reporters in Hollywood, Houdini said, "I'm pretty old-fashioned; I've been in love with the same woman for twenty-five years." Houdini later invested a good deal of money in his own movie company, but, as so often happened with his business investments, he lost heavily.

During the war Houdini was unable to go to Europe, where audiences were clamoring for him, but when the war was over, he took up his professional life where he had left off and sailed for England once more. His fame had become so great that when a new dictionary of the English language was published in 1920, Houdini's name was listed with the description, "American mystericist, wizard, and expert in extrication and self-release." Also listed was the verb form of his name, "Houdinize; to release or extricate oneself (from confinement, bonds and the like), as by wriggling out." And outside of dictionaries and books, persons everywhere called a clever trick or escape "doing a Houdini."

With such a great reputation—one achieved after years and years of painful application—Houdini was quick to anger if his name was not advertised in big enough lights, or if managers did not accord him the respect he felt he deserved. He had a hot temper, but one that cooled almost as quickly as it was ignited.

After an emotional explosion, he would often mention it sheepishly in his diary, regretting his lack of restraint —especially if it left him with a headache, as it sometimes did.

He did not make many close friends but he had friendly relations with most of the professional magicians of his day, including Harry Kellar and Howard Thurston. And through his growing interest in spiritualism he became a friend and correspondent of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the English author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Although Doyle was a firm believer in spiritualism to the point where it was a religion with him, and Houdini was a constant skeptic, the two became very close. Eventually, however, their differences brought an end to their friendship, especially when Houdini began to campaign openly against fraudulent practices by certain spiritualistic mediums. Houdini devoted the last years of his life to such exposures and created a good many enemies among those who felt that in attacking dishonest mediums he was attacking spiritualism itself. Half showman, half crusader, he publicly offered sums up to ten thousand dollars to any medium who could produce effects that he, himself, could not produce by natural means, the money to be donated to charity.

Yet, underneath his attack against dishonesty among some spiritualists, there was a half-hope, a yearning, to believe that it was actually possible to reach out into the misty land of death and speak to beloved persons one had lost. How marvelous it would be, for instance, if he could hear and see his mother once again! He tried, in séances, to reach her and friends of his who had died, but he had no success.

His book *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* had already been published, in 1909. It was dedicated to his father "who instilled in me love of study and patience in research." In 1921 he had published an historical account of earlier "miracle men" called *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods.* Now he added another title to the list, *A Magician Among the Spirits,* a report of his experiences in the world of spiritualism. At one point during his investigations into spiritualism, he was asked to testify before a committee set up by the United States Senate which had been created to inquire into the practice of allegedly fraudulent mediums practicing in Washington, D.C., with an eye to outlawing them. Although no law was passed, the national spotlight was turned on Houdini during his appearances before the committee, and he enjoyed the experience.

With all this, he was still busy performing—not only in the great theatres of the day but in orphanages and old people's homes. Many an old woman received a white rose, tossed to her by Houdini. Many a child cherished a memory of sitting in Houdini's lap while he patiently explained some trick. At a town in Canada, Houdini insisted that free seats be provided for a hundred old men from a Poor Farm. The manager refused. Houdini gave the man a tongue lashing, finished his show, and never performed for him again. Prisons and institutions for the mentally handicapped were regularly visited by him. And he devised a whole show to be performed before blind children. Often he would come home to Bess saying, "I've found a child we simply have to adopt."

The adoption was always postponed until the day when they would settle down. Dogs, cats, canaries, and

other small creatures were adopted constantly and the Houdinis sometimes felt as if they were back in the circus again, carrying their own menagerie with them. One of these pets, an eagle, Houdini trained to fly about and fetch articles at his command.

Hundreds of helpless and poverty-stricken persons besieged him for help, and few were turned away. Many he supported altogether, even though he did not know them personally. One winter while he was performing in Edinburgh he was appalled at seeing many of the children on the streets without shoes. Houdini went to a shoe shop and bought three hundred pairs of shoes, and then invited all the shoeless children to the theatre.

There seemed to be no limits to his generosity or his strength and energy, although friends were beginning to notice that he looked tired and that the gray in his hair was increasing.

"Anybody can have a little gray in his hair after fifty," Houdini remarked. "I feel fine. I'm in perfect condition."

To prove it, he decided to try one of the most dangerous and difficult feats he had ever performed. A certain Rahmen Bey, acting at a New York theatre, claimed that by the use of supernatural powers he could stop the life processes in his body and be locked in an airtight coffin for ten minutes or more without any ill effects. Bey had been demonstrating this act for some time and drawing large crowds.

Here was a challenger—and a possible competitor—right in Houdini's domain, one that could not be ignored. Houdini began to practice slow breathing under water. When he felt that he was ready, after a few weeks, he announced that he could outdo the young

Rahmen Bey at his own trick. Bey's longest time inside an airtight coffin had been nineteen minutes.

On August 5, 1926, a group of medical men gathered at the edge of an indoor swimming pool at New York's Hotel Shelton. Many of the doctors wore looks of concern. Houdini was fifty-two, an age when excessive physical strain could do serious, if not fatal, damage to his system. They estimated that once the metal coffin was closed over Houdini's head there would be only enough air within for about fifteen minutes of breathing, at the most.

When he got into the coffin, Houdini said, "If I die, it will be the will of God and of my own foolishness. But I'm going to prove that a normal human being can go longer without air than all the books say—and do it without any so-called supernatural powers, either." With that he lay back and the lid was closed and hermetically sealed. The coffin was lowered under water.

Groups of swimmers took turns holding the coffin below the surface. Men in business suits and straw hats, work clothes and bathing suits, stood waiting around the pool. With them stood Houdini's assistants, remembering their orders that the coffin should not be brought to the surface until Houdini had rapped against the lid, the signal that he wanted to be released.

The minutes sped by . . . ten . . . twenty. A half hour. Men looked at each other. What was the sense of Houdini's staying down any longer? He had already defeated Rahmen Bey's record by more than ten minutes.

But there was no signal from the coffin. More minutes passed. Worriedly, the men consulted their watches. An hour!

A physician stepped over to the men in charge of

the ropes attached to the coffin. "Bring him up! He's either too weak to signal or else he's dead."

Other voices joined in, protesting.

The assistants refused to do anything. They were under orders to wait for the signal, and they were used to obeying Houdini. Also, they had unwavering confidence in his powers.

The group waited some more. A few persons walked nervously back and forth across the tiled edge of the pool, their footsteps echoing. Again a doctor appealed, "This can't go on. He's been down there an hour and a half. Even if he's still alive, his blood pressure and heart can't stand such a strain."

Then, at precisely one hour and thirty-one minutes, Houdini gave his signal. Rapidly, the coffin was hauled up. The lid was opened.

Houdini sat up, pale but smiling. The doctors hovered around him, stethescopes out. He permitted them to examine him. He was in a state of extreme exhaustion, they announced, his blood pressure, respiration and temperature all abnormal.

"I am a little tired," Houdini admitted as he got up. "What I need is an hour or so of exercise." He walked off unaided, got dressed, and went home.

At home he found Mrs. Rahner having her afternoon cup of coffee. She offered him some but he refused. Just as he never touched alcohol, he seldom drank coffee.

"You look peaked, Harry," she said. "You'd better rest awhile."

He paced around restlessly for a moment, and then said, "The best way to get rid of fatigue is to work it off."

A short time later he was at the Y.M.C.A playing handball, and then running around the race track as energetically as if he were back at the Pastime Athletic Club striving to win a race.

THE LAST CHALLENGE

"Just one more year, Bess," Houdini said to his wife in the fall of 1926. "Then I'll retire. In fact, another year and I won't even have time for performances any more. I want to do so many things it makes me dizzy to think of them. I want to start that University of Magic we've talked about so much. Just think, there'll be courses in the history of magic, its science, its philosophy, ethics, showmanship, advertising——"

"You're running out of breath already," Bess laughed.

Houdini continued earnestly, "But first I want to take courses at Columbia University in English. And write some more books. Then there's that new trick I want to work up, having myself frozen in a block of ice——"

"Are you going to present the new trick at Columbia?" Bess asked teasingly. "I thought you were retiring."

Houdini took the jibe good-naturedly before turning his talk to the new show he was planning for the season.

All was going well when, in September, Bess had an attack of food poisoning during an engagement at Providence, Rhode Island. Houdini trusted scarcely anyone to take care of her except himself. All one night he sat

by her bed. Then, the following morning, he had to go to the theatre in Providence and take care of the many details that Bess normally supervised.

Bess was somewhat better that night and Houdini left on a night train for New York, having arranged for the nurse who traveled with the show, Sophie Rosenblatt, to bring Bess on to Albany where they would join each other the following Monday for a show there.

Business and family matters kept Houdini busy every hour in New York. When he left New York for Albany he had been up for three nights and two days without any sleep——and he had a show to do the next day.

In Albany he managed one hour's sleep before spending the day, before the evening show, with newspaper men, and in preparing a special feature on stage in the expectation that New York's Governor Al Smith would be in the audience.

Among the regular acts Houdini planned to present that night was what he called the Chinese Water-Torture Cell. This was an act he had developed out of the water can trick, originated many years before. The "cell" was a box made of heavy glass constructed on a metal frame. The lid was equipped with a pair of stocks patterned after the kind that were once used to imprison an individual's arms or legs. Houdini's feet would be put through the stocks and then he would be lowered head-first into the glass tank. The audience could see Houdini hanging head-down in the water, arms crossed, while the lid was padlocked at the top.

In the middle of the act that night, just as he was being lowered into the water, Houdini felt one of his ankle bones snap. Pain shot up his leg, as if a knife had turned under the flesh. He signaled to be lifted out.

Standing on one foot, leaning against the glass cell, he asked for a doctor.

A Dr. Hannock, a bone specialist in the audience, responded. "Looks like a bad fracture," he said when he had inspected the injured ankle. "I'd have to have X-rays to tell just how bad. In any case, you'll have to go to the hospital immediately."

Houdini gestured toward the auditorium full of people. "With all those people waiting to see the show? The hospital will have to wait."

Hopping on one foot, Houdini finished the show.

The next day doctors set the broken ankle and told him to stay off his foot for a week. Houdini said nothing, but there was a stubborn line to his jaw when he went home.

That night, when Bess urged him to go to bed, he shook his head. "I can't sleep anyhow—ankle pains too much."

"You could at least rest."

"I've got a show to do."

"You can't do it on one foot."

"Tell Collins to bring me some of those slats of wood in the prop room. And get some adhesive tape from Sophie."

"What are you going to do?" Bess asked.

"Make a brace. If you won't go and get the materials I'll have to hop on one foot and get them myself."

Houdini spent hours sitting in a chair while he worked at a home-made brace to support his broken ankle. In the morning, weary but triumphant, he was limping around the room, the brace in place.

He finished his scheduled performances in Albany and then went on to Montreal, still performing with the

help of the brace. In Montreal he had the ankle inspected by a doctor the bone specialist had recommended.

"It seems to be healing fine, in spite of the way you've been treating it," the doctor admitted. "You know, Houdini, you're a remarkable physical specimen. I wonder if you'd mind if I gave you a thorough physical examination."

Houdini had no objection. When the doctor was through with the examination he told Houdini "You're in top-notch condition. A perfect physique. Perfect health."

Happily, Houdini rode back to his hotel room to tell Bess. "All your worries were for nothing. It looks as if I'm doomed to live forever."

"I hope so," Bess said. "Maybe your good health will do for both of us." In spite of her frailty, Bess had almost always managed to keep pace with the strenuous routine of living with Houdini. Now, however, she was still weakened from the food poisoning and spent much of her time resting, trying to regain her strength.

On a Tuesday in late October Houdini went to Montreal's McGill University and gave a lecture to the students there. While he was speaking, an art student made a sketch of him which he showed him after the lecture.

"Very good," Houdini said. "You're welcome to try your art out on me any time. Why don't you drop around later in the week at the theatre? Maybe you'll find me still long enough to pose for you."

The following Friday the art student appeared at Houdini's dressing room with a friend.

Houdini was resting on a couch, reading his mail,

and giving his still-tender ankle a brief vacation. "Sit down," he told the boys. "You can do some sketching while I rest."

The students got out their sketch pads and were busily drawing their famous model when a third boy came in, another friend of the young artist.

"You certainly can do some marvelous things, Houdini," the boy said, standing near Houdini's couch. "I've seen your show and I can't get over your physical endurance. Some of the fellows were saying that a person could hit you as hard as possible and you could stand it without flinching. Is that true?"

"I have to be prepared," Houdini said, "and brace myself for the blow." He picked up a fresh pile of letters, concentrating on trying to finish the big stack beside him.

"Could I try hitting you once?" the young man asked.

Houdini was preoccupied with the letter he was reading. He murmured something absently which the boy interpreted as meaning, "Go ahead."

The boy doubled up his fist, leaned down, and struck Houdini in the abdomen with several swift, strong blows.

Houdini jerked upright at the fourth blow, holding up his hand. "No, no—you took me by surprise! That's enough." He pressed his hand to his side a moment, then shook his head ruefully. "I'm afraid you got the wrong cue, young man."

The other two boys had got to their feet and stood staring in perplexity, seeing the evident pain in Houdini's face.

"I'm sorry!" the young man exclaimed. "I thought you told me to go ahead when I asked. . . . I hope I haven't hurt you." Remorse shone in his eyes.

"Oh, no," Houdini denied. "Just a temporary—pang." He moistened his lips. "But I'm afraid you'd better go now, boys. I've a lot of mail to read yet."

"Are you sure you're all right, sir?" the boy persisted. "I'd feel terrible if——"

"Perfectly all right," Houdini said and waved the three on their way.

He closed his eyes when the door closed, holding his side, frowning at the strange, menacing pain. It was nothing, he told himself. A muscle spasm. A few more minutes of rest and he would be his old self again. He reached for more letters and finished reading his mail. When the signal came for his performance he got up, brushed his hair, straightened his tie and went out onto the stage.

Down in the audience, the boy who had delivered the punches to Houdini's body sighed in relief. Obviously, the Great Houdini was perfectly all right or he wouldn't be on the stage. There he was, going through his tricks with all the effortlessness and grace and mastery that had made his name a household word.

Only Houdini was aware of the pain still driving through his flesh. Nothing, he told himself. Nothing compared with the pains he had suffered sometimes in a grueling escape.

But there seemed no escape from this pain. By night the pain stabbed and ground and tore. Still he went on with his show and the audience saw only the master magician displaying one astonishing bit of skill after another.

Bess saw more deeply. "Is there anything wrong, Harry?" she asked after the final curtain.

"A little indigestion," Houdini said.

That night he lay in his bed, staring at the darkness,

fighting against the pain that shackled him. This pain had a lock that would not open to his will. This strait jacket had grown fast to his flesh. Sweating, he struggled. At last he could stand the pain no longer and called Bess. It was two o'clock in the morning.

"My indigestion's pretty bad," he said. "Can't sleep."

Alarmed, Bess sat on the bed and massaged his back and shoulders. "Shall I call the doctor?"

"No. I'll be all right."

But he could not sleep. Even Bess's healing fingers had no effect. Restlessly, stifling groans, he tossed back and forth. Finally, at dawn, he fell asleep.

When he awoke he insisted that he felt all right. He would go on with the show, in the tradition of all true showmen.

The matinee on Saturday was an experiment in agony but Houdini finished it, falling into a doze during the intermission. The evening performance was more agony. When he had finished he lay in his dressing room in a cold sweat, unable to dress himself in his street clothes without Bess's help.

"You can't take that train to Detroit tonight," Bess insisted, "show or no show." He was scheduled to appear in Detroit the next evening.

"A train ride won't hurt me. I always do my best thinking on trains."

Stubbornly, he had his way. But as the train clacked onward across the autumn-colored landscape, all thought was driven from him. He was conscious of only one thing, pain driving through him with every turn of the iron wheels on the rails. At last he was forced to give in to the pleas of the nurse and Bess that a wire be

sent asking a doctor to meet the train at the station in the morning.

The doctor was there. As soon as Houdini could be gotten to a hotel, the doctor took his temperature and examined him. The thermometer registered 102°. Then a severe chill gripped him and he lay shaking for almost a half hour. Other physicians hurried to his bedside.

"Your symptoms indicate acute appendicitis," one of them told the shivering and sweating magician. "You must be operated on at once."

Houdini clenched his teeth and asked Bess, "How many tickets have been sold for the show tonight?"

"All of them," someone else spoke up. "A full house."

"I'll go through with my act," Houdini said.

That evening when he walked out onto the stage his temperature was 104°. Bowing and smiling as usual, he proceeded to go through his regular routine. In the wings, members of the troupe watched with strained faces, seeing through the mask of Houdini's smile. Only they saw how Houdini fumbled certain acts while assistant James Collins covered up. At one point in the show, Houdini was supposed to step up into a cabinet to demonstrate a certain magical illusion. Houdini walked to the cabinet and stood there a minute like a man in a trance, his tortured face concealed from the audience. Vainly, he tried to lift his leg the short distance needed to mount the step. He turned and beckoned to Collins to help him.

Toward the end of the act he was too weak to perform his final bit of magic, the mere pulling of yards of silk ribbon from a small glass bowl—he who had been able to manipulate the strongest chains men could

devise. Collins moved forward quickly and finished the trick.

The curtain rang down and Houdini collapsed, too weak even to protest when he was carried to a hospital ambulance and taken to Grace Hospital. Once he was there, stretched out on a high, white bed, his indomitable spirit flashed out in a final rebellion.

"When I go to the operating room nobody has to carry me there. I'll walk!"

He was overruled. The headline performers in this show were the physicians and it was they who were in command, but even as the ether mask was slipped over Houdini's face he was still fighting. He had conquered every kind of trap. He had relied on his strength and will all his life. He would not be beaten now. If they would just let him go . . . let him be. . . . A fast sprint . . . a good hard game of handball . . .

Under the lights above the operating table the surgeon's knife moved. Skillfully, swiftly, the men of medicine probed, looked, and shook their heads. Houdini's appendix had been ruptured. Gangrene was setting in. Peritonitis was far advanced. He could not live more than twelve hours more, they said.

The doctors kept their grim knowledge to themselves. To Houdini's questions when he came out of the ether they gave evasive answers. Nor did they tell Bess the truth. The strain and worry of the last few days had set her own physical condition back sharply and they were afraid of the effect the mental shock might have.

Houdini, studying their somber faces, guessed the truth. Like the doctor fifteen years ago who had given him only a year to live, these doctors, too, had passed sentence. He had fooled the other doctor. He would fool them.

The old, fierce, steely light was in his eyes as he braced himself for the battle. The Great Houdini would prove his real greatness now.

At the end of the twelve hours he was still alive. And at the end of twenty-four. One day went by. A second. A third. On the third day a second operation was performed to check the poisons spreading through his body.

The battle light in his eyes was as strong and fierce as ever. Each day Bess was carried to his bedside. Twice a day a bulletin of Houdini's condition was given out to the reporters and the news was broadcast to a waiting nation. Although the doctors acknowledged that they were watching a miraculous performance of sheer will against the deadly poisons attacking Houdini's system, their bulletins were not encouraging. They knew the nature of the challenger Houdini was facing now. They knew that he was doomed.

Houdini did not know, or refused to believe it if he did. He fought on. Four days. Five. Six. On through Sunday, October 31. Seven days. Six and a half more than the doctors had given him.

At the end of the seventh day, Theo and Bess were at his bedside. When he turned to them, they saw the change. The battle light was gone. The Great Houdini was ready to give in, at last.

"I'm tired of fighting, Dash," Houdini said faintly. "I guess this thing is going to get me." He closed his eyes and lay still, his breathing shallow.

Theo's throat worked. He took Houdini's hand and held it.

Bess leaned over Houdini, her arms around him, and her tears spilled down onto his cheeks. Houdini opened his eyes and looked at her. "Bess—" he whispered. He

tried to strain upward. His lips moved. For a long, intense moment his eyes clung to hers. Then he fell back on the pillow. In a moment the long battle was over.

Somewhere down in the streets a group of children went running through the rain, dressed in witches' and goblins' costumes, small sheet-draped ghosts in search of handouts of candy and popcorn. For it was Halloween. Even in death Houdini had managed to choose an appropriate time to leave the stage where he had performed for fifty-two valiant years.

Houdini's body was placed in the same coffin in which he had performed at the Hotel Shelton when he had tested his endurance against that of Rahmen Bey. He was buried beside his mother in the family lot at Machpelan Cemetery, Cypress Hills, and her letters to him were enclosed in the casket with him. The service was conducted by the Society of American Magicians, of which he had been president for ten years. The following Sunday a memorial service was held at the Bijou Theatre, and among the persons who spoke were the popular entertainers Eddie Cantor and Harry Lauder. Cantor broke down in the middle of his speech and had to leave the stage.

From everywhere spoken and written tributes poured in. A longtime friend and fellow-magician, Howard Thurston, said, "As a showman he was in a class with Barnum; in force of character he resembled Theodore Roosevelt."

B. M. L. Ernst, vice-president of the Society of American Magicians, and Houdini's attorney, said, "He was the greatest magician of his time, and maybe of all times. He was absolutely unique."

Houdini's library of magic, valued at five hundred thousand dollars, was willed to the Library of Congress where it still remains.

Theo took over Houdini's show and carried on in his place as Hardeen, "brother of the Great Houdini."

Among the papers Houdini left was one for Bess alone. In a sealed envelope was a message for her, one which he had told her he would try to repeat to her from beyond the boundaries of death. In spite of the fact that he had been a skeptic about such communication, he had tried such experiments with many others and he had had one small hope—and conviction: If anybody could speak from beyond the grave, surely it would be he, especially if Bess were waiting and listening.

Year after year, on Halloween, Bess tried to contact the spiritual world, sitting in a darkened room, with a candle burning before Houdini's picture, while she waited for the secret message.

At the end of ten years she gave up, telling reporters with a small, sad smile, "Ten years is long enough to wait for any man." But before she herself died in 1943, a plump, white-haired woman suffering from a heart ailment, she said, "I love to think that I will meet Harry in heaven."

Buried with Houdini were many of his professional secrets. However, he left masses of notes explaining many of his feats and the feats of others. He himself wrote several books and numerous articles on his methods, and planned to write more. Several books on Houdini's magic are available for the serious student.

One of Houdini's greatest virtues was his refusal to

assume the role of a superman. He insisted over and over again that what he could do, others could do also, if they applied themselves. When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle insisted that Houdini had supernatural powers that he himself did not recognize, Houdini remained firm. No, he replied, his feats were accomplished only by self-discipline and constant practice.

Even the great actress Sarah Bernhardt found it hard to believe that Houdini was not able to perform miracles. As a result of an injury, Bernhardt had had to have one of her legs amputated. One day, after watching Houdini in a performance in Boston, she rode with him in his car after the show. "Houdini," she said, "you have such marvelous powers . . . won't you restore my missing leg?"

With persons so eager to believe in the miraculous, Houdini could easily have set himself up as a kind of god. Or—as a police officer had once pointed out—he could have become a super criminal.

He remained what he was: the greatest escape artist the world has ever known, a supreme magician and a flawless showman. He was utterly and always faithful to that one unchanging purpose, and his goal was to master not only his art, but himself. Courage, patience, loyalty to his own ideals and to persons close to him, and unshakable determination—these all contributed to the transformation of Erich Weiss into The Great Houdini—master magician and remarkable human being.

The critic and author Edmund Wilson summed it up when he wrote, "The history of Houdini's career somehow makes us think better of humanity than the lives of many other figures of more conventional reputations

in more exalted fields. It is thrilling, even in a juggler or a trapeze performer, to see some human faculty carried to its furthest point, to a point where its feats seem incredible. And Houdini had much more to commend him to our admiration: he was a brave and independent man of rare integrity . . ."